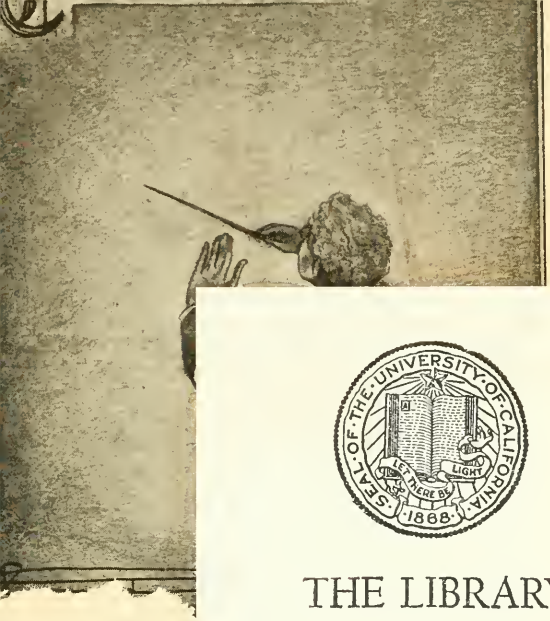
THE SAHARA

PIERRE LOTI



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THE SAHARA

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BY

PIERRE LOTI

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INTRODUCTION

I

IN your voyage down the west coast of Africa, after passing the southern extremity of Morocco, you sail for days and nights together past the shores of a never-ending land of desolation. It is the Sahara, "the great sea without water," to which the Moors have given also the name of "Bled-el-Ateuch," the land of thirst.

These desert shores stretch for five hundred leagues without one port of call for the passing vessel, without one blade of grass, one sign of life.

Solitude succeeds solitude with mournful monotony; shifting sandhills, vague horizons—and the heat grows each day more intense.

At last there comes in sight over the sands an old city, white, with yellow palm trees set here and there—it is St Louis on the Senegal, the capital of Senegambia.

A church, a mosque, a tower, houses built in Moorish style—the whole seems asleep under the burning sun, like those Portuguese towns, St Paul and St Philip of Benguela, that once flourished on the banks of the Congo.

As one draws nearer one sees with surprise that this town is not built on the shore, that it has not even a

port, nor any direct means of communication with the outer world. The flat, unbroken coast line is as inhospitable as that of the Sahara, and a ridge of breakers forever prevents the approach of ships.

Another feature, not visible from a distance, now presents itself in the vast human ant heaps on the shore, thousands and thousands of thatched huts, lilliputian dwellings with pointed roofs, and teeming with a grotesque population of negroes. These are the two large Yolof towns, Guet n'dar and N'dartoute, which lie between St Louis and the sea.

If your ship lies to awhile off this country, long pirogues with pointed bows like fish-heads, and bodies shaped like sharks, are soon seen approaching. They are manned by negroes, who row standing. These pirogue men are tall and lean, of Herculean proportions, admirable build and muscular development, and their faces are those of gorillas. They have capsized ten times at least while crossing the breakers. With negro perseverance, with the agility and strength of acrobats, ten times in succession have they righted their pirogue and made a fresh start. Sweat and sea water trickle from their bare skins, which gleam like polished ebony.

Here they are in spite of all, smiling with an air of triumph, and displaying their magnificent white teeth. Their costume consists of an amulet and a bead necklet, their cargo of a carefully sealed leaden box, which contains the mails.

In this box also are orders from the governor for the newly arrived ship, and in it, too, are deposited papers addressed to members of the colony.

A man in a hurry can safely entrust himself to these boatmen, secure in the knowledge that he will be fished out of the sea as often as necessary with the utmost care, and that eventually he will be deposited on the beach.

But it is more comfortable to continue one's voyage as far south as the mouth of the Senegal, where flat-bottomed boats take off the passengers and convey them smoothly by river to St Louis.

This isolation from the sea is one of the chief causes of the stagnation and dreariness of this country. St Louis cannot serve as a port of call to mail-steamers or merchantmen on their way to the southern hemisphere. One goes to St Louis if one must, and this gives one the feeling of being a prisoner cut off from the rest of the world.

II

In the northern quarter of St Louis, near the mosque, there stood a little solitary house belonging to one Samba-Hamet, trader on the upper river. It was a lime-washed house. The cracks of its brick walls, the crevices in its heat-shrunken wood-work harboured legions of white ants and blue lizards. Two marabout cranes haunted its roof, clacking their beaks in the sunshine, and solemnly stretching out their featherless necks when anyone chanced to pass along the straight, unfrequented street.

O the dreariness of this land of Africa!

The slight shadow of a frail thorn palm moved in its slow daily course along the whole length of the

heated wall; the palm was the only tree in the quarter, where no green thing refreshed the eye. On its yellowed fronds flights of those tiny blue or pink birds, called in France *bengalis*, would often come and perch. But all around lay sand, sand, nothing but sand. Never a tuft of moss, never a fresh blade of grass grew on the soil, parched by the burning breath of the Sahara.

III

On the ground floor dwelt a horrible old negress called Coura n'diaye, once the favourite of a great negro monarch. There she had her collection of grotesque tatters, her little slave girls, decked with beads of blue glass, her goats, her big-horned sheep, her half-starved, yellow curs.

In the upper storey there was a large, lofty room, square in shape, to which an outside staircase of worm-eaten wood gave access.

IV

Every evening at sunset, a man in a red jacket, with a Mussulman fez on his head—in a word, a spahi—entered Samba-Hamet's house. Coura-n'diaye's two marabout cranes used to watch him from a distance as he approached. From the farther end of the dead-alive town they would recognise his gait, his step, the striking colours of his uniform, and would show no nervousness at his entry —so long had they known him.

He was a tall man, of proud, erect carriage; he was

of pure European race, although the African sun had already deeply embrowned his face and chest. This spahi was a remarkably fine-looking man, a grave and manly type of beauty, with large clear eyes, almond-shaped like an Arab's. From under his fez, which was pushed to the back of his head, a lock of brown hair had escaped and hung in disorder over his broad, unsullied brow.

The red jacket was admirably becoming to his well-moulded figure, and his whole build was a compound of litheness and muscular strength.

As a rule he was serious and thoughtful, but his smile had a seductive charm, and gave a glimpse of teeth of remarkable whiteness.

V

One evening, the man in the red jacket could be seen climbing Samba-Hamet's wooden staircase with more than his customary air of abstraction.

He entered the lofty chamber, his own, and seemed surprised at finding no one in it.

It was a curious place, this lodging of the spahi's. It was a bare room, furnished with mat-covered benches. Strips of parchment, written upon by the priests of Maghreb, and talismans of various kinds hung from the ceiling.

He went to a large casket, raised on feet, ornamented with strips of copper and variegated with brilliant colours, a box such as is used by the Yolofs for locking up their valuables. He tried it and found it locked.

Thereupon he lay down on a *tara*, a kind of sofa made of light laths, the work of negroes of the Gambia shore. Then he took from his pocket a letter, and began to read it, first kissing the corner with the signature.

VI

It was without doubt a love-letter, written by some fair one—an elegant Parisienne, perhaps, or possibly a romantic senora—to this handsome spahi *d'Afrique*, who seems of the very mould for playing leading rôles as the lover in melodrama.

This letter will perchance furnish us with the clue to some highly dramatic adventure, which will serve as prelude to our tale.

. . . . . .

VII

The letter, which the spahi had touched with his lips, bore the postmark of a village hidden away in the Cevennes. It was written by a poor old hand, trembling and unpractised. Its lines overlapped, and it was not free from mistakes.

The letter said :—

My dear son,—The present is to give you news of our health, which is pretty good just now; we thank the good God for it. But your father says he feels himself growing old, and as his eyes are failing a good deal, it is your old mother who is taking up the pen to talk to you about

ourselves. You will forgive me, knowing that I cannot write any better.

My dear son, I have to tell you that we have been in great trouble for some time. Since you left us three years ago, nothing has gone well with us. Good fortune, as well as happiness, left us when you did. It has been a bad year on account of a heavy hailstorm which fell on the field and destroyed nearly everything except at the side of the road. Our cow went sick, and it cost us a lot of money to have her attended to. Your father's wages are sometimes short, since he came back to this country of young men, who work faster than he. Besides this we have had to have part of our roof repaired, as it threatened to fall in with the heavy rains. I know that soldiers haven't much to spare, but your father says that if you can send us what you promised without stinting yourself, it will be very useful to us.

The Mérys, who have plenty of money, could easily lend us some, but we don't like asking them, especially as we do not want them to think us poor people. We often see your cousin, Jeanne Méry; she grows prettier every day. Her chief joy is to come and see us, and to talk about you. She says she would ask nothing better than to be your wife, my dear Jean. But her father will not hear of the marriage, because he says we are poor, and also that you have been a bit of a scapegrace in your day. I think, however, that if you were to get your quartermaster's stripes, and if we could see you coming home in your fine uniform, he would perhaps end by consenting after all. I could die happy if I saw you married to her. You would build a house near ours, which would no longer be fine enough for you. We often make plans about it together with Peyral in the evenings.

My dear son, send us a little money without fail, for I assure you that we are in great trouble. We have not been able to manage this year, as I told you, because of

that hailstorm and the cow. I see your father worrying himself terribly, and at night I often see him, instead of sleeping, thinking about it and turning from side to side. If you cannot send us the whole amount, send what you can.

Good-bye, my dear son; the village folk often ask after you, and want to know when you are coming back. The neighbours send hearty greetings. As for me, you know that I have had no joy in life since you went away.

I enclose my letter, embracing you, and Peyral does likewise.

Your loving old mother,

FRANÇOISE PEYRAL.

VIII

. . . Jean leaning on his elbow at the window fell into a reverie, looking absently at the wide prospect of African scenery stretched out before him—the pointed outlines of the Yolof huts, grouped by hundreds at his feet—in the distance the troubled sea and the ceaseless onset of the African breakers; the yellow sun about to set, still shedding upon the desert, further than the eye could see, its wan radiance; sand interminable; a distant caravan of Moors; flights of birds of prey swooping through the air; and yonder, a point on which he fixed his eyes, the cemetery of Sorr, whither he had already escorted some of his comrades, mountain-bred like himself, who had died of fever in that accursed climate.

O to return home to his aged parents, to live in a little house with Jeanne Méry, quite close to the humble paternal roof. Why had he been exiled to this land of Africa? What had he in common with

this country? As for this uniform and this Arab fez in which they had dressed him up, and which, for all that, gave him so grand an air, what a burlesque disguise for him, the humble little peasant from the Cevennes.

He remained there a long time lost in thought, dreaming of his village, this poor soldier on the banks of the Senegal. With sunset and nightfall, his thoughts plunged themselves in unrelieved gloom.

From the direction of N'dar-toute came the hurried drumming of the tom-tom, summoning the negroes to the *bamboula*, and fires were lighted in the Yolof huts. It was an evening in December; a vexatious winter wind sprang up, whirling the sand in eddies here and there, and the great, parched land shuddered with an unwonted sensation of chill.

. . . . . .

The door opened, and a yellow dog with straight ears and a look suggesting the jackal, a dog of the country, of the Laobe breed, bounded into the room and gambolled about his master.

At the same time, a young negro girl, with a merry smile, appeared at the door of the lodging. She made a little jerky bow, brusque and comic, the negresses' salutation, and said *Kéou*! (Good-day).

IX

The spahi glanced at her absently.

"Fatou-gaye," he said in a mixture of creole French and Yolof, "open the casket; I want to take out my money."

"Your *khâliss*!" (your coins), exclaimed Fatou-gaye, opening her eyes so that the whites showed against the black eyelids. "Your *khâliss*!" she repeated with the mixture of fear and effrontery of children who have been surprised in a fault and are afraid they will be punished.

And then she showed him her ears, on which hung three pairs of exquisitely worked gold earrings.

They were ornaments of pure Galam gold, wonderfully delicate, such as are made by black craftsmen who possess the secret of this art, plying their trade in the shade of small, low-roofed tents, where they work mysteriously, crouching on the desert sands. Fatou-gaye had just been buying these trinkets, long-coveted, and that was what had become of the spahi's *khâliss*, a hundred francs or so, accumulated little by little, the fruit of a soldier's petty economies, and set aside by him for his old parents.

The spahi's eyes flashed, and he made as if to strike her with his whip, but his arm sank harmlessly to his side. He soon regained his self-control, Jean Peyral; he was gentle, especially towards the weak.

He uttered no reproaches, knowing that they would be useless. It was his fault no less than hers. Why had he not been more careful to hide away this money, which he must now at all costs procure elsewhere?

Fatou-gaye knew how to soothe her lover with cat-like caresses; how to clasp him in her black silver-braceletted arms that were shapely as the arms of a statue; how to lean her bare bosom against the red cloth of his jacket, rousing in him feverish desires

that would bring about pardon for her offence. . . .

And the spahi sank with indifference on the tara beside her, putting off until the morrow the task of raising the money for which his old parents were waiting in their cottage overseas.

. . . . . .

PART I

I

IT was three years since Jean Peyral had first set foot in this land of Africa, and since his arrival he had undergone an extraordinary transformation. He had passed through several phases of moral development. Environment, climate, nature, had gradually exercised all their enervating influence upon his youthful personality. Slowly he had felt himself gliding down unknown slopes—and to-day he was the lover of Fatou-gaye, a young negro girl of Khassonké race, who had cast upon him I know not what sensual and impure seduction, what talismanic enchantment.

The story of Jean's early life was not a very complicated one.

At twenty the ballot had snatched him from his old mother, who wept. He had gone away like other lads of the village singing noisily to keep himself from bursting into tears.

His height marked him out for cavalry. The mysterious attraction of the unknown had induced him to choose the corps of spahis.

His childhood had been passed in the Cevennes, in an obscure village in the heart of the woods.

In the strong, pure mountain air he had shot up like a young oak tree.

The first impressions graven on his childish mind were wholesome and simple, the well-beloved forms of his father and mother, his home, a little old-fashioned house shaded by chestnut trees. These things were all imprinted ineffaceably upon his memory, and had their own sacred place deep down in his heart. And then there were the great woods, his wanderings at random along paths deep in moss —and there was freedom.

In the first years of his life he knew nothing of the rest of the world beyond the bounds of the obscure village where he was born. He was aware of no other neighbourhood, but the wild, open country where the shepherds dwelt, the mountain sorcerers.

In these woods, where he was wont to roam all day long, he nursed the dreams of a solitary child, the musings of a shepherd boy—and then suddenly he would be seized with a wild desire to run, to climb, to break branches from the trees, to catch birds.

One distasteful memory was that of the village school, a gloomy place, where one had to stay quietly cooped up within four walls. His parents gave up sending him there; he was always playing truant.

On Sunday he was given his fine mountaineer's dress to wear, and he went to church with his mother, hand in hand with little Jeanne, whom they picked up as they passed Uncle Méry's house. After service, he used to play bowls on the common under the oak trees.

He was conscious that he was better looking and

stronger than the other children, and at play he was always the one to be obeyed, and he was accustomed to meet with this submission wherever he went.

When he grew older his independence of spirit and his insatiable restlessness became more marked. He would go his own way. He was forever in mischief, untethering horses and galloping far away on them, forever poaching with an old gun that would not go off, and frequently getting into trouble with the rural constable, to the great despair of his Uncle Méry, who had hoped to have him taught a trade, and to make of him a steady man.

It was true. He had really been "a bit of a scapegrace in his time," and it was still remembered against him at home.

Nevertheless he was a general favourite even with those who had suffered most at his hands, because he had a frank and open disposition. No one could be seriously angry with him who saw his good-natured smile. Besides, if he were spoken to gently and taken the right way, he could be led like a docile child. Uncle Méry, with his lectures and threats, had no influence over him. But when his mother reproved him, and he knew that he had grieved her, his heart was very heavy, and this big boy, who had already the air of a man, could be seen hanging his head, almost in tears.

He was undisciplined, but not dissolute. This big, strong, growing youth was of a proud, and somewhat uncouth, demeanour. In his village young men were safe from evil communications from the precocious depravity of sickly, town-bred creatures, so

much so, that when he reached his twentieth year and had to begin his term of military service, Jean was as pure as a child, and almost as ignorant of the facts of life.

II

But then came a period full of all kinds of surprises for him.

He had followed his new comrades to places of debauch, where he had made the acquaintance of "love" in the most sordid and revolting conditions that a great town affords. His youthful understanding was confused, what between surprise and disgust, and also the devouring fascination of this new thing just revealed to him.

And then, after some days of riotous life, a ship had carried him far, far away over the calm, blue sea, and had landed him on the banks of the Senegal, a bewildered exile.

III

One day in November—the season when the great baobabs shed their last leaves on the sand—Jean Peyral had cast his first glance of curiosity on this corner of the earth, where the hazard of destiny had condemned him to pass five years of his life.

The strangeness of this land had in the first instance appealed strongly to his imagination and inexperience. Besides that, he had appreciated very keenly the joy of having a horse, of curling his rapidly growing moustache, of wearing an Arab fez, a red jacket, and a big sabre.

He considered the ensemble very fine, and this gave him great pleasure.

IV

It was November—the fine weather season corresponding to our French winter; the heat was less violent, and the dry wind of the desert had taken the place of the great storms of the summer.

When the fine weather begins in Senegal, one may safely camp out in the open without a roof to one's tent. For six months not a drop of water will fall on the land; every day without respite, without remorse, it will be scorched by the consuming sun.

It is the season in which the lizards delight—but the water fails in the cisterns; the marshes dry up; the grass dies; even the cactuses, the thorny nopals, no longer open their melancholy yellow flowers. Yet the evenings are chill. At sunset a strong sea-breeze invariably springs up, rousing the breakers off the African coast to their everlasting moaning, pitilessly shaking the last autumn leaves.

It is a dreary autumn, bringing with it neither the long evenings of France, nor the charm of the first frosts, nor harvest, nor golden fruit. Never a fruit in this land disinherited of God! Even the dates of the desert are denied to it, nothing ripens there, except the ground nut and the bitter pistachio.

The sensation of winter, experienced in the midst of heat which is still extreme, has a curious effect upon the spirit.

Here and there upon the vast, hot plains, forlorn

and desolate, covered with dead grass, side by side with slender palms, tower huge baobabs, mastodons, as it were, of the vegetable kingdom; their bare boughs are inhabited by families of vultures, lizards, and bats.

V

Poor Jean had soon fallen a victim to boredom. He suffered from a kind of vague, indefinable melancholy, such as he had never felt before, the beginning of home-sickness for his mountains, his village, for the cottage of the aged parents, so dear to him.

The spahis, his new companions, had already worn their big sabres in various Indian and Algerian garrisons. In the taverns of maritime towns, where they had spent their youth, they had caught the mocking and licentious turn of mind, peculiar to those who lead a roving life. They were masters of ready-made, cynical jests, in slang, in Sabir, and in Arabic, and with these jests they met every contingency. Good fellows at heart, gay companions as they were, they had none the less certain habits which Jean failed to understand, and certain pleasures that excited in him extreme repugnance.

Jean was a dreamer, like all mountaineers. Reverie is a thing unknown to the stupefied and corrupt faculties of the populace of great cities. But among those who have been brought up on the land, among sailors, among fishermen's sons who have grown up in their father's boat, amid the perils of the deep, there are men who really dream, true, but

inarticulate poets, with a poet's insight into all things. Only, they have not the faculty of putting their impression into form, and remain incapable of interpreting them.

Jean had plenty of leisure in barracks, and he spent it in observing and thinking.

Every evening he was wont to take a walk along the great stretch of beach, whose bluish sands were lighted up by sunsets of unimaginable beauty.

He would bathe in those great breakers of the African sea, amusing himself, like the child he still was, by letting himself be rolled over and over by these enormous waves, which covered him with sand.

Or he would take long walks, for the mere pleasure of movement, of breathing deeply the salt air that blew off the sea. At times this unending flatness vexed him, oppressed his imagination, accustomed to the contemplation of mountains. He felt, as it were, a need to go on and on forever, to widen his horizon, to catch a glimpse of what lay beyond.

At dusk, the beach was crowded with negroes returning to the villages, laden with sheaves of millet. Fishermen, too, were drawing in their nets, surrounded by clamorous swarms of women and children.

These hauls of fish in Senegal were always miraculous draughts; the nets would break under the weight of thousands of fish of every shape and form. The negresses carried away on their heads baskets full of them; the black babies returned home garlanded with big fish, still alive, strung together through the gills.

There were extraordinary-looking people, just arrived from the interior; picturesque caravans of Moors and Peuhles, who had come down the Neck of Barbary; incredible scenes at every step, in the white glow of an unnatural radiance.

And then the blue summits of the sandhills turned pink; the last horizontal rays of light glided across this whole region of sand; the sun was quenched in blood-red vapour. And with one impulse all that black throng cast themselves face downwards on the ground to offer up the evening prayer.

It was Islam's holy hour. From Mecca to the Sahara coast the name of Mahomet passed from mouth to mouth, wafted like a mysterious breath over Africa. Little by little it became fainter as it travelled over the Soudan, until it expired there on those black lips by the shore of the great, restless sea.

The old Yolof priests in their flowing robes, turned towards the sea, recited their prayers with their faces bowed upon the sand, and all the shores were covered with prostrate men. Then all was still, and night fell with the rapidity usual in those countries of the sun.

At nightfall, Jean returned to the spahi's quarters in the south of St Louis.

In the great white barrack room, open to the evening breeze, all was still and quiet. The numbered beds of the spahis were ranged in rows along the bare walls; the tepid wind from the sea swayed their muslin mosquito curtains. The spahis were out. Jean returned home at a time when the other men

were scattered about the deserted streets, hastening to their pleasures, to their loves.

It was at such times that the isolated barracks seemed to him dreary, and that he thought most of his mother.

VI

In the southern quarter of St Louis stood some old brick houses, Arab in appearance, which were lighted up at evening, and whose lamps continued to cast their red rays upon the sands at a time when all that dead-alive town lay asleep. Strange odours of negroes and alcohol, all blended and intensified by the torrid heat, issued thence. Here also at night broke forth an uproar as from hell itself. In that quarter the spahis reigned supreme. Thither betook themselves these unfortunate, red-jacketed warriors, to raise a racket and to forget their troubles; to absorb, actuated either by habit or bravado, incredible quantities of alcohol, and wantonly to spend the sap of their lusty youth.

A dishonouring intimacy with mulatto women lay in wait for them in these vile dens, and extravagant orgies were held, in a delirium caused by absinthe and the torrid heat of Africa.

But Jean avoided with horror these haunts of vice. He was very steady, and was already putting aside the little he could save out of his soldier's pay, against the blissful moment of his home-coming.

He was very steady, and yet his comrades did not rally him on the subject.

Handsome Muller, a tall Alsatian, who set the

tone in the spahis' barracks by virtue of a past full of duels and adventure—handsome Muller thought a great deal of him, and every one was always of the same opinion as Fritz Muller. But Jean's real friend was Nyaor-fall, the black spahi, a gigantic African, of the magnificent Fouta-Diallonké tribe, a strange, imperturbable figure, with a delicate Arab profile, and a mysterious smile always hovering on his thin lips—a splendid statue in black marble.

This man was Jean's friend; he used to take Jean home to his native dwelling in Guet n'dar; he would make him sit beside his wives on a white mat, and offer him negro hospitality: *kouss-kouss* and *gourous*.

VII

In the evenings at St Louis, social life followed the usual monotonous routine of small colonial towns. The fine weather brought a little animation to these dead-alive streets. After sunset, a few women who had escaped fever displayed their European frocks on the Place du Gouvernement, or in the avenue of yellow plains of Guet n'dar. This introduced a suggestion of Europe into that country of exile.

On that large Place du Gouvernement, surrounded by symmetrical, white buildings, one might have imagined oneself in some town of southern Europe had it not been for that immense stretch of sand, that interminable plain, which flung afar its uncompromising line.

These few persons who came to take the air were

all acquaintances, and passed the time in staring at one another. Jean would look at these people, and they also would look at Jean. The handsome spahi, who walked alone with such a grave seriousness, roused the curiosity of St Louis society, who imagined that his life contained some romantic episode.

There was one woman, in especial, who looked at Jean, a woman better dressed and prettier than the rest.

She was said to be a mulatto, but so white, so very white, that she might have been taken for a Parisienne.

White and pale she was, of a Spanish pallor, with fair chestnut hair—the fairness of mulattos—with large, half-closed, dark-shadowed eyes, which she turned slowly with creole languor.

She was the wife of a rich farmer of revenue on the river. But at St Louis she was referred to by her Christian name, like a coloured woman. Cora they called her, in contempt.

She had just returned from Paris, as the other women could see from her gowns. Jean, however, was not yet sufficiently experienced to be able to define the difference. But he was well aware that her trailing gowns, even when they were simple, had something distinctive about them, a gracefulness, in which the other women's gowns were lacking.

The point that he principally noticed was that she was very beautiful, and as she always flung her glances around him, he felt a sort of tremor when he met her.

"She's in love with you, Peyral," handsome Muller had declared, with the knowing air of a man who has had his successes in the pursuit of love affairs.

VIII

It was true that she was in love with him in her mulatto way, and one day she summoned him to her house to tell him so.

. . . . . .

For poor Jean the two months that followed fled past in the midst of enchanting dreams. This unwonted luxury, this dainty, perfumed woman, all these things worked terrible confusion in his hot head and chaste body. Love, of which hitherto only a cynical travesty had been revealed to him, now intoxicated him.

And all this had been bestowed upon him precipitately, without reservation, like a splendid fortune in a fairy tale. Yet one reflection troubled him. This woman's avowal, this want of modesty, disgusted him a little when he thought about it.

But he seldom pondered, and when he was at her side he was intoxicated with love.

He, too, began to experiment with refinements of the toilet. He used scent, and tended his moustache and his brown hair. It seemed to him, as to all young lovers, that life had begun for him on the day when he first met his mistress, and that all his past existence counted for nothing.

IX

Cora loved him, too, but the heart had little to do with the sort of love she felt.

A mulatto of Bourbon, she had been brought up in the sensual idleness and luxury of wealthy creoles, but had been kept at arm's length by white women with pitiless contempt, repulsed everywhere as a coloured woman. The same racial prejudice had pursued her to St Louis; although she was the wife of one of the leading farmers of revenue on the river, she was left alone, an outcast.

In Paris she had had numbers of exquisites to love her; her ample means had enabled her to make a presentable appearance in France, to taste vice according to the most elegant standards of propriety.

At present she was tired of delicate gloved hands, the sickly affectations of dandies, and their romantic languid airs. She had chosen Jean because he was big and strong. In her way she loved this splendid, wild growing plant. She loved his rough, simple manners; she found attraction even in the coarse texture of his soldier's shirt.

Cora's dwelling was an immense brick building, with the somewhat Egyptian aspect common to the old parts of St Louis, and white like an Arab caravanserai. Below, there were great courts, whither came camels and Moors of the desert to crouch upon the sand, and where swarmed a grotesque, motley crowd of cattle, dogs, ostriches, and black slaves.

Up above there were endless verandahs, supported

by massive, square columns, like the terraces of Babylon.

The apartments were reached by means of outside staircases of white stone, monumental of aspect. All this was dilapidated and dreary, like everything else at St Louis, that town which has already lived its life, that moribund colony of bygone days.

The drawing-room had a certain air of grandeur, with its lordly proportions and its furniture of the past century.

Blue lizards haunted it; cats, parrots, tame gazelles chased one another over the fine Guinea mats; negro women servants went dolefully backwards and forwards across the room, shuffling their sandals, diffusing pungent odours of soumaré and musk-scented amulets. The ensemble produced an indefinably melancholy atmosphere of exile and solitude. It was very dreary, all of it, especially in the evening, when the sounds of life ceased and gave place to the eternal complaint of the African breakers.

In Cora's bedroom everything was gayer and more modern. The furniture and hangings, lately arrived from Paris, gave it an air of fresh elegance and comfort. One breathed there the perfume of the most fashionable essences bought at the scent shops on the boulevard.

It was there that Jean passed his hours of intoxication. This room seemed to him an enchanted palace, surpassing in luxury and charm all that his imagination could have pictured.

This woman had filled his life and had become his only happiness. With the refinement of a creature

sated with pleasure, she had desired to possess Jean's soul as well as body. With the feline guile of a creole she had acted for the benefit of this lover, who was younger than herself, an irresistible comedy of ingenuous love. She had succeeded; he belonged to her, body and soul.

XI

A very comical little negress, of whom Jean took no notice, lived in Cora's house as a "captive." This little girl was called Fatou-gaye.

She had been brought quite recently to St Louis and sold as a slave by Douaich Moors, who had captured her in one of their raids upon the territory of the Khassonkés.

Her extreme mischievousness and her fierce independence had caused her to be relegated to a very humble position in the household. She was looked upon as a little nuisance, a useless mouth, and an acquisition to be regretted.

Having not yet quite arrived at marriageable age, when the negresses of St Louis deem it proper to clothe themselves, she generally went naked, with a necklet of *grigris* round her throat, and a few glass beads strung round her loins. Her head was very carefully shaven, except for five tiny locks of hair, knotted and stiffened with gum, five little rigid tails, arranged at regular intervals from the forehead to the nape of the neck. Each of these locks had a coral bead at the tip, except the middle one, which displayed a more precious ornament. This was a gold sequin of great antiquity, which must have been

brought in old days from Algiers by caravan, after long and complicated wanderings through the Sahara.

Without this grotesque arrangement of hair, the regularity of Fatou-gaye's features would have been striking. She was of the purest Khassonké type: a small delicate Grecian face, with a skin smooth and black as polished onyx; teeth of dazzlingly whiteness; eyes of extraordinary mobility, two large, jet black, restless orbs rolling left and right, with whites of a bluish tint, and black eyelids.

When Jean was leaving his mistress, he often used to meet this little creature.

As soon as she saw him she tucked a piece of blue cotton cloth around her waist—this was her festal garment—and came towards him smiling. With soft, caressing inflections in her small, shrill, piping negress's voice, with hanging head and the mincing airs of an enamoured ouistiti, she would say,

May man coper, souma toubab. (Translated: Give me a copper, give me a sou, my white man.)

That was the refrain of all the little girls in St Louis. Jean was used to it. When he was in a good temper and had a sou in his pocket, he would give it to Fatou-gaye.

But that was not the most curious feature of the incident. What was out of the ordinary was Fatou-gaye's behaviour. Instead of buying herself a piece of sugar, as other girls might have done, she would go and hide herself in a corner and set to work to sew very carefully into the sachets of her amulets the sous that she received from the spahi.

XII

One night in February a suspicion crossed Jean's mind.

Cora had asked him to leave at midnight, and just as he was going away, he thought he heard a sound of pacing in an adjoining room, as if someone were waiting there.

He left at midnight, and then he returned with stealthy tread, stepping noiselessly over the sand. He climbed over a wall and on to a balcony, and looked into Cora's room through the half-opened door leading on to the terrace.

. . . . . .

Someone had taken Jean's place by his mistress's side—quite a young man, wearing the uniform of a naval officer. He had made himself at home, and was lounging in an arm chair with an air of disdainful ease.

She was standing, and they were talking.

At first it seemed to Jean that they were speaking an unknown tongue. The words were French, yet Jean could not understand them. These scraps of speech, which they interchanged so lightly, seemed to him mocking enigmas, perfectly meaningless for him. Cora too, was no longer the same; her expression had changed; a kind of smile hovered on her lips, a smile such as he remembered to have seen on the lips of a tall girl in a place of ill-repute.

. . . . . .

Jean found himself trembling. He felt as if all the blood had left his head, and had poured back into his heart. He heard a roaring in his ears, like the noise of the sea; his eyes grew dim.

He was ashamed of being there, yet he was determined to remain and to understand.

He heard his name spoken; they were talking about him; he drew nearer, supporting himself against the wall, and he caught some words more distinctly spoken.

"You are wrong, Cora," said the young man in a very quiet voice, with an exasperating smile. "In the first place, he is a very handsome fellow, and then he, at all events, loves you."

"True, but I wanted two of you. I chose you because your name is Jean, like his. Otherwise I should have been capable of making a slip in the name when I was talking to him. I am very absent-minded."

. . . . . .

And then she drew closer to the new Jean.

She was still more changed in voice and face. With the languorous, lisping, coaxing inflections of the creole accent she murmured childish words to him, and offered him her lips, still warm from the spahi's kisses.

. . . . . .

But her lover had caught sight of the pale face of Jean Peyral gazing at them through the half-open door, and for all reply he pointed Cora towards him with his hand.

The spahi was standing there, motionless, petrified, fixing his wide, haggard eyes upon them.

When he found that they in their turn were looking at him, he simply stepped back into the shadow. Cora had advanced towards him, with the hideous expression of an animal disturbed in its love-making; this woman frightened him; she was almost near enough to touch him. She shut her door with a furious gesture; shot a bolt behind it . . . and all was over.

Through the disguise of the polished *élégante* the mulatto woman, grand-daughter of a slave, had betrayed herself again with her appalling cynicism. She felt neither remorse, nor fear, nor pity. . . .

The coloured woman and her lover heard a noise as of a body falling heavily to the ground, a loud sinister noise in the silence of the night—and then later, towards morning, a sob behind that door, and a rustling sound as of hands fumbling in the dark.

The spahi had risen to his feet, and feeling his way, he went out into the night.

XIII

Walking on aimlessly, like a drunken man, sinking ankle-deep in the sand of the deserted streets, Jean came to Guet n'dar, the negro town with its thousands of pointed huts. In the darkness he stumbled over men and women who lay sleeping on the ground rolled in pieces of white cotton, seeming to him like a population of phantoms. He walked on and on, feeling as if he had lost his senses.

Soon he found himself on the shore of the sombre sea. The breakers were roaring loudly. With a shudder of horror he distinguished swarms of crabs, fleeing before his footsteps, in solid masses. He remembered to have seen a corpse that had been washed up on the beach, torn and excarnated by them. He had no wish for such a death.

Nevertheless these breakers attracted him; he felt himself fascinated, as it were, by those great, glistening volutes, already gleaming silvery in the doubtful light of the morning, curling over all along the vast beaches, farther than the sight could reach.

It seemed to him that their coolness would be grateful to his burning head, and that in their kindly waters death would appear less cruel.

. . . . . .

And then he remembered his mother and Jeanne, the little friend and sweetheart of his childhood. He no longer wished for death.

He threw himself on the sand and fell into a strange, heavy sleep.

. . . . . .

XIV

For full two hours it had been daylight, and Jean's sleep continued.

He was dreaming of his childhood and of the woods of the Cevennes. It was dark in these woods, dark with the mysterious obscurity of dreamland; his visions were clouded like far-off memories. He saw himself there, a child, with his mother in the

shade of immemorial oaks: in a spot carpeted with moss and slender grasses he was plucking bluebells and heather.

. . . . . .

And when he awoke, he cast a bewildered glance around him.

The sands were glittering under a torrid sun. Black women, adorned with necklets and amulets, were traversing the burning ground, singing weird melodies. Great vultures glided backwards and forwards silently through the still air; the grasshopper chirped noisily. . . .

XV

Then he noticed that his head was sheltered under a little canopy formed by a piece of blue cotton, supported by a series of small sticks planted in the sand, the whole erection casting upon him a clear-cut, ashen shadow with grotesque contours. . . .

The patterns of the piece of cotton seemed to him familiar. He turned his head and saw Fatou-gaye seated behind him, rolling her mobile eyeballs.

She it was who had followed him and had spread her festal garment above his head.

Had it not been for this shelter he would undoubtedly have died of sunstroke sleeping on those sands.

She it was who for several hours had been crouching there in ecstasy, very gently kissing Jean's eyelids when no one was passing, dreading to wake him lest

she should send him away, and no longer have him all to herself; trembling, too, at times lest Jean should be dead, yet happy, perchance, had it been so. For then she would have dragged him far away, very far away, and would have stayed with him always until she died by his side, clasping him tight, so that none should separate them again.

"It is I, my white man," she said, "I did this, because I know that the sun of St Louis is not good for the *toubabs* of France. . . . I knew very well," continued the little creature with tragic solemnity, in an indescribable jargon, "that there was another *toubab* who came to see her. I did not go to bed last night so that I might listen. I was hidden on the staircase among the calebashes. When you fell down by the door, I saw you. I watched over you the whole time. And then when you got up, I followed you."

Jean gazed up at her, his eyes wide with astonishment, and full of kindness and gratitude. He was touched to the heart.

"Do not tell anyone, child. . . . Go home now quickly, and do not tell anyone that I came and lay down on the beach. Go back to your mistress at once, little Fatou. And I, I will go back to the spahi's house."

And he caressed her, patting her gently with his hand, with precisely the same emotion as he felt when he used to scratch the neck of the big, coaxing Tom cat, who at night in barracks would come and curl himself up on Jean's soldier's cot.

Quivering under Jean's innocent caress, with

hanging head, half-closed eyes, and heaving bosom, she took up her festal garment and went away trembling all over with joy.

XVI

Poor Jean! Suffering was a new experience for him; he rebelled against this unknown power that had seized him and was strangling his heart with bruising hoops of iron.

Smothered rage, rage against that young man, whom he longed to break in pieces with his own hands; rage against that woman, whom it would have delighted him to maul with blows of his spurs and whip; all this he endured, and at the same time he was possessed with I know not what urgent physical need of action, an impulse to rush headlong into some desperate piece of folly. He found, too, that his comrades vexed and irritated him. He was conscious that they cast upon him glances which were already inquisitive, and might to-morrow become ironical.

Towards evening he asked for, and obtained permission, to go with Nyaor-fall to try some horses to the north of the Point of Barbary. They had a furious gallop over the desert sands in gloomy weather, under a wintry sky—for out there, too, there are wintry skies, less frequent than our own, of a startling and sinister effect in that land of desolation—unbroken clouds, so black and low that the plain beneath appears white, and the desert seems an interminable, snow-covered steppe. When the

two spahis passed in their burnooses, carried at full speed on their madly excited horses, huge vultures, that were lazily walking about the ground in families, rose in startled flight and began to describe fantastic curves in the air overhead.

. . . . . .

At night Jean and Nyaor returned dripping with sweat to their quarters, with their exhausted horses.

XVII

But on the morrow of this one day of unnatural excitement, fever attacked Jean.

On the morrow, the spahi, lying on his wretched little grey mattress, was placed on a stretcher and taken to hospital.

. . . . . .

XVIII

Noon! . . . The hospital is as still as a great mortuary.

Noon! . . . The grasshopper is chirping. The African woman is singing in her thin voice her vague and drowsy song. Upon the whole expanse of the desert plains of Senegal the sun darts down its perpendicular rays of torrid light, which the vast horizon reflects in shimmer and glitter.

. . . . . .

Noon! . . . The hospital is as still as a great mortuary. The long, white galleries, the long corridors are deserted. Half way up the high, bare wall, limewashed a dazzling white, hangs a clock, pointing to noon with it slow-moving hands of steel. The grey-lettered, mournful inscription around the dial is fading in the sun, *Vitæ fugaces exhibet horas.* The twelve strokes ring out painfully, with that feeble tone that the dying know; that tone, heard in feverish, wakeful hours, by those who have come hither to die; that tone like a knell, tolled in an atmosphere too heavy with heat to conduct the sounds.

Noon! . . . The mournful hour, when sick men die. The air of this hospital is heavy with fever, the indefinable emanations, as it were, of death.

. . . . . .

Above, in an open ward, are voices that whispered softly; little, scarcely perceptible sounds; the good sister's cautious footsteps, as she moves carefully over the mats. She comes and goes with a troubled air, Sister Pacôme, with her pale, sallow face under her nurse's cap. Doctor and priest are there, too, seated beside a bed, which is curtained with a white mosquito net.

Out-of-door, through the open window, are sun and sand, sand and sun, and far away, blue outlines and shimmering light.

Will he pass away, poor spahi? . . .

Is this the moment when Jean's soul will take its flight thither into that overwhelming noon-tide air?

. . . So far from home, where will it find a resting place in all these desert plains? . . . Whither will it vanish? . . .

. . . . . .

No. The doctor, who had remained there a long time, expecting the final departure, has quietly withdrawn.

The cooler hours of evening have come, and the breeze off the sea brings relief to the dying. To-morrow, perhaps! But Jean is more tranquil, and his head does not burn so terribly.

Down below in the street, outside the door, a small negro girl sat crouching on the sand, playing at knucklebones with white pebbles to keep herself in countenance when any one went past. She had been there since morning, endeavouring to avoid notice, playing her little part, for fear of being driven away. She did not venture to question any one, but she knew very well that if the spahi were to die, he would be carried through this door on his way to the cemetery of Sorr.

XIX

The fever lasted another week, and daily at noon Jean became delirious. Each renewed attack was regarded with anxiety. Nevertheless the danger was over, and the disease conquered.

Oh those hot hours of midday, hours that weigh most heavily upon the sick! Those who have had fever on the banks of these African rivers know them

well, those deadly hours of torpor and slumber. Shortly before noon, Jean would fall asleep. It was a kind of suspended existence, haunted by confused visions and a persistent impression of suffering. And from time to time he had the sensation of dying, and for an instant he would lose all consciousness of himself. These were his moments of peace.

Towards four o'clock he would awake and ask for water. The visions faded, shrank away into remote corners of the ward, behind the white curtains, and vanished. Only his head continued to hurt violently, as if boiling lead had been poured into it, but the delirium had passed its climax.

Among these faces, gentle or grimacing, real or imaginary, that hovered around him, he had two or three times thought he recognised Cora's lover standing near his bed and looking at him kindly, but disappearing as soon as Jean's eyes were raised to his. Doubtless he, too, was an illusion, like those people from his village whom he imagined he saw there, strange in demeanour, vague and distorted in appearance.

Yet, curiously enough, since he had seemed to see him thus, he no longer felt that he hated him.

But one evening—no, he was certainly not dreaming—one evening he really saw him there before him, in the same uniform he had worn at Cora's house, with his two officer's stripes shining on his blue sleeve. Jean looked at him with his great eyes, raising his head slightly, and he stretched out his wasted arm as if to feel if there were really someone there.

Then, seeing that Jean recognised him, the young man, before he disappeared as usual, took the spahi's hand and pressed it, saying simply,

"Pardon me."

Tears, his first tears, sprang to the spahi's eyes and brought relief.

XX

Jean's convalescence was rapid.

Once the fever had left him, his youth and strength soon gained the upper hand. But nevertheless he could not forget, poor fellow, and he was very unhappy. At times he fell into moods of wild despair, and nourished almost savage notions of vengeance. But this phase was soon over, and then he would say to himself that he would willingly endure whatever humiliations she might choose to inflict, if he might see her and possess her again, as before.

His new friend, the naval officer, came again from time to time, and sat by his bedside. He spoke to him almost as one would speak to a sick child, although he was scarcely as old as Jean.

"Jean," he said one day very gently. . . . "Jean, you know, about that woman—if my telling you this sets your mind at rest—I give you my word of honour that I have never set eyes on her again since that night that you remember. You see, there are many things, my dear Jean, that you don't know about yet. Some day you will realise; you, too, that one must not take such a small matter so much to heart. . . . In any case, as far as that

woman is concerned, I am quite willing to swear to you never to go near her again."

This was the only reference to Cora made by either of them, and the promise actually restored Jean's peace of mind.

Oh yes! he realised clearly now, poor fellow, that there must be "many things that he did not know about yet," that there must be—commonplaces, no doubt, to people moving in a social sphere more sophisticated than his own—instances of cold-blooded, subtle perversity, outside the scope of his imagination.

Little by little, moreover, he grew fond of this friend, whom he could not understand; this friend once cynical, but now grown kind, who regarded life with inexplicable serenity and light-heartedness, and who had come to offer him his protection as an officer, by way of amends for the suffering he had caused him.

But Jean had no wish for protection; neither promotion nor anything else appealed to him any longer; his heart, so young still, was filled with the bitterness of this first agony of despair.

. . . . . .

XXI

. . . It was at Dame Virginie-Scholastique's. (Missionaries sometimes have veritable inspirations in naming their neophytes.) It was one in the morning; the tavern showed large and dark. As is usual

with places of ill-repute, it was closed with thick doors, reinforced with iron.

A small evil-smelling lamp shed its light on a jumbled litter of objects, crowded painfully together in the dense atmosphere—red jackets and bare, black flesh, weird entanglements, broken glasses and broken bottles on the table and on the ground; red caps, negro bon-bons, spahis' sabres, all in floods of beer and alcohol. The temperature of the hovel was that of a vapour bath. The heat was maddening, the atmosphere dense with black, or milky, smoke, and with the odours of absinthe, musk, spices, soumaré, sweat of negroes.

It must have been a hilarious revel, and surpassingly uproarious, but now it was over. There was an end to the songs and the racket. Now followed the period of reaction, of stupefaction that comes after drinking. The spahis were there, some of them dull-eyed, resting their foreheads on the table, and smiling vacuously. Others still preserved their dignity, bracing themselves against intoxication, still holding their heads erect—handsome faces with strong features, the lustreless eyes retaining their seriousness with an indescribable expression of melancholy and loathing.

Distributed among them, haphazard, was Virginie-Scholastique's whole pack of little twelve-year-old negro girls and small negro boys.

Outside a listening ear could hear in the distance the cry of jackals prowling around the cemetery of Sorr, where for some of those now here there were places already marked out beneath the sand.

Dame Virginie, copper-coloured, thick-lipped, with woolly hair wrapped in a piece of red cotton—drunk herself—was sponging the blood from a head of fair hair. A tall spahi, with a young, fresh-coloured face, and hair the colour of ripe corn, lay there unconscious with broken head, while Dame Virginie, assisted by a black wench more drunk than her mistress, was sponging his wound with fresh water and applying compresses of vinegar. She was not actuated by motives of compassion—certainly not, but by fear of the police. She was really uneasy, Virginie Scholastique, for the blood continued to flow. It had filled a whole bowl and it would not stop, and the old harridan was sobered by her anxiety.

Jean was seated on a bench in a corner, more drunk than all the rest, yet still holding himself stiffly, his eyes staring and glassy.

He it was who had inflicted this wound with an iron latch wrenched off a door, and he was still holding the latch in his clenched hand, unconscious of the blow he had struck with it.

. . . . . .

It was a month since his recovery, and every evening he could have been seen dragging himself from tavern to tavern, foremost among the dissolute and drunken, practising himself in the insolent airs of rake and cynic.

There was still much in this behaviour that was due to mere childishness, but the result was the same; he had travelled along a terrible road during this

month of suffering. He had devoured novels, whose every detail was new to his imagination, and he had assimilated all their unwholesome extravagances. And then he had gone the round of the easy conquests of St Louis, coloured women and white, among whom his handsome person had secured for him unresisted possession.

And to crown everything, he had begun to drink.

Oh you who lead a well-regulated domestic life, seated peacefully day after day by your fireside, do not pass judgment on the sailors and spahis, men of ardent natures, whom their destiny has plunged into abnormal conditions of life upon the wide ocean, or in the far away lands of the sun, exposed to unheard of privations, to desires and temptations of which you have no conception. Do not pass judgment on these exiles, or these wanderers, whose sufferings, joys, tortured imaginings are unknown to you.

So Jean began to drink, and he drank more than the others; he drank prodigiously.

"How can he do it?" said those around him, "a man who has never been accustomed to it."

It was precisely because he had "never been accustomed to it" that his head was stronger, and for the moment he could stand more. And this impressed his comrades greatly.

Yet through it all, in spite of the rakish airs he gave himself, like the big, undisciplined child he was, poor Jean had kept himself almost chaste.

He would not stoop to a dishonouring intimacy with negresses, and when Dame Virginie's pupils let their hands stray over him, he pushed them away with the

end of his riding whip, like unclean animals, and the miserable little creatures came to look upon him as a sort of human fetish whom they might not approach.

Bue he was violent when he was drunk; when he lost his head and his enormous physical strength was no longer under control, he was terrifying. He had struck that blow just now, roused by some casual jest on the subject of his love affairs, and he no longer remembered anything about it. He remained there motionless, with lack-lustre eyes, still holding in his hand the bloodstained latch.

Suddenly his eyes flashed. Now it was that old woman who was provoking his unreasoning wrath, the senseless rage of a drunken man. He half rose to his feet, threatening her in his fury. The old hag uttered a hoarse cry; she went through a minute of horrible fear.

"Hold him," she moaned to the inert beings who were already lying asleep under the tables.

Some heads were raised; feeble, impotent hands tried to hold Jean back by his jacket, but their efforts were futile.

"Give me some drink, you old witch," he said; "some drink, you old devil of night; you horrible old hag, some drink."

"Yes, yes," she answered, her voice choking with fear. "That's it! Some drink, Sam, some absinthe, quick, to finish him off; absinthe laced with brandy."

In these emergencies, Dame Virginie did not consider expense. Jean drank it off at one draught,

flung his glass against the wall, and fell back as if struck by lightning.

He was successfully "finished off," as the old harridan had said. He was no longer dangerous.

She was strong, was old Scholastique, sturdily built—and wholly sober now. With the help of her black wench and her little girls, she lifted Jean like a dead weight, and after rapidly searching his pockets for the last coins they might contain, she opened the door and threw him out. Jean fell like a corpse, his arms extended, his face in the sand—and the old hag, after discharging a flood of appalling abuse and savage obscenities, drew to her door, which closed heavily with a loud clang of iron.

All was still. The wind blew from the cemetery, and in the intense silence of midnight could be clearly heard the shrill howling of the jackals, the uncanny music of the body-snatchers.

XXII

Françoise Peyral to her son.

My dear son,—We have had no answer to our letter, and Peyral says it is beginning to be quite time that something came for us. I can see that he is very unhappy whenever Toinou goes past with his box and says that he has nothing for us. I, too, am very anxious. But I always believe that the good God will guard my dear boy, as I so often beg of Him, and that no harm can come to him, nor any trouble, either through bad behaviour or punishment. If there were anything like that I should be too unhappy.

Your father wishes me to say that memories come into

his head of what he himself was like, formerly, when he was in the army. And he says, when he was stationed in garrison towns, he has seen young men, who were not very sensible, have a rough time of it, through comrades leading them on to drink and to mix with bad women, who are always on the lookout to ruin them. I am telling you this because he wants me to, but for my part I know that my dear boy is steady, and that he has ideas in his head which will surely keep him away from all these evil things.

Next month we will send you a little more money. Out there I expect you have to pay a great deal for trifling things. I know you will not spend money unnecessarily, when you think of all the trouble your father takes. As for me, a woman's trouble is no great matter, and I speak for him, the dear man. The village folk always talk about you at the evening working parties and merrymakings, and no social gathering passes without some conversation about our Jean. All the neighbours send hearty messages.

My dear son, your father and I embrace you with all our hearts. The good God keep you.

Your mother,

FRANÇOISE PEYRAL.

This letter was received by Jean in the prison attached to the barracks, where he had been locked up "for drunkenness, and for having had himself brought back by the guard."

Fortunately the fair-haired spahi's wound was not very serious, and neither the injured man nor his comrades had wished to report Peyral. Jean's clothes were soiled and blood-stained, his shirt in rags, and his head still confused with the fumes of

alcohol. Mists swam before his eyes, so that he could scarcely read. And besides, a dense veil now lay upon the affection he felt for the friends of his childhood and for his family. This veil was woven by Cora and his own despair and passions. (It is thus, sometimes, during periods of bewilderment and loss of balance. Then the veil fades away, and quite tranquilly one returns to all that one used to love.)

In spite of all, this touching letter, so full of trust, found without difficulty the way to Jean's heart. He kissed it devoutly, and tears came to his eyes.

And then he swore to himself to drink no more, and as the habit was not yet inveterate he was able to keep strictly to his promise; he was never drunk again.

XXIII

A few days later an unforeseen event created a fortunate and necessary diversion in Jean's existence.

The spahis were ordered, both horses and men, to go for a change of air into camp at Dialamban, several miles to the south of St Louis, near the mouth of the river.

The day before their departure, Fatou-gaye came to the quarters, wearing her fine blue garment, to pay a farewell visit to her friend. He kissed her for the first time on both her little black cheeks. At nightfall the spahis set out on the march.

As for Cora, after the first moments of excessive excitement and resentment, she missed her lovers.

In truth she missed both of them, both Jeans, each of whom had appealed equally to her senses. Treated by the spahi as a goddess, it was a change to be treated by the other as the light woman she really was. Hitherto no one had exhibited towards her such calm, absolute contempt; the novelty of it charmed her.

But she was seen no more at St Louis trailing her flowing draperies over the sand. She took her departure secretly one day, despatched by her husband on the recommendation of the authorities, to one of the most remote branches in the south.

Doubtless Fatou-gaye had been gossiping, and St Louis was shocked at this last scandal in which this woman had figured.

XXIV

It is a calm night at the end of February, a typical cold weather night—calm and cool, following upon a burning day.

The column of spahis bound for Dialamban is crossing at a walking pace the plains of Legbar. Leave had been given to break rank, each man at his choice and pleasure, and Jean, who has fallen to the rear, is marching quietly along in the company of his friend Nyaor. . . .

In the Sahara and the Soudan there are cold nights such as this, possessing the clear splendour of our own winter nights, but with greater transparency and luminousness.

A deathlike stillness pervades the whole country.

The sky is greenish blue, sombre and deep, with an infinity of stars. The moon shines bright as day, and defines the outlines of things with surprising sharpness, tinging them with rosy light.

In the distance, farther than sight can penetrate, stretch swamps overgrown with the depressing vegetation of the mangrove tree. Such is all this region of Africa, from the left bank of the river as far as the inaccessible borders of Guinea.

Sirius is rising; the moon has reached its zenith; the silence is awe-inspiring.

Out of the pink sand rise the tall, bluish euphorbiæ, casting a short, hard shadow. The moon outlines the smallest shadows of the plants with a set and frozen precision, intense in its immobility and mystery.

Here and there are clumps of brushwood, blurred obscurities, forming great gloomy patches on the luminous, pink background of the sands; then sheets of stagnant water, with vapour floating above them like white smoke, feverish miasma, more noxious and subtle than that of the day time. There is a penetrating sensation of chilliness, strange after the heat of the day; the moist air is all impregnated with the odour of great swamps.

Here and there by the roadside lie large skeletons, contorted with pain, carcases of camels, swimming in a black, fetid fluid. There they lie, grinning at the moon, shamelessly displaying their flanks, torn by vultures, their bodies hideously disembowelled.

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From time to time the cry of a swamp bird breaks the immense silence.

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At long intervals a baobab stretches its massive branches into the still air, like a great dead madrepore, a tree of stone, and the moon defines with surprising sharpness the contours of its structure, rigid like a mastodon's, conveying to the imagination the impression of a thing inert, petrified and cold.

In the midst of its polished branches perch black masses: the inevitable vultures. Whole families of them roost there confidingly, sleeping heavily; they suffer Jean to approach, with the indifference of fetish birds, and the moon casts blue reflections and metallic gleams on their great folded wings.

And Jean is full of wonder at this first revelation at dead of night of all the intimate details of this land.

. . . . . .

At two o'clock there bursts forth a chorus of yells, as of dogs baying the moon, but more savage, more grating, more weirdly sinister. Sometimes at night at St Louis, when the wind blew from the direction of the cemetery, Jean had fancied he heard in the far distance similar lamentations. But to-night this lugubrious music was close at hand, there, in the brush. The dismal yelping of jackals mingled with piercing strident caterwaulings of hyenas. A battle was in progress between two wandering packs on the prowl in search of dead camels.

"What is it?" Jean asked the black spahi.

It was, perhaps, a presentiment: a kind of horror seized him. The thing was undoubtedly there, quite near him, in the brush, and the sound of these voices made his flesh creep and his hair stand on end.

"Those who are lying dead," replied Nyaor-fall with expressive pantomime, "those who are lying dead on the ground, these beasts find them and eat them."

And when he said "eat them," he made as if to bite his black arm with his magnificent white teeth.

Jean understood and shuddered. Afterwards, whenever he heard at night these dismal concerts, he remembered the explanation which Nyaor's mimicry had made so clear, and he, who in broad daylight was seldom afraid, shuddered and felt chilled to the bone by one of those vague and gloomy forebodings that assail the superstitious mountaineer.

The noise grows fainter and dies away in the distance; it breaks out again, somewhat muffled, at another point of the horizon, then it ceases and all is still again.

The white vapours that hang above the sleeping waters grow denser with the approach of morning. One is penetrated and chilled to the bone by the glacial dampness of the swamps. It is a curious sensation, to experience cold in this country. The dew falls. Little by little the moon glides down the western sky, is obscured, extinguished. The heart is wrung by the solitude.

At last, low on the horizon, appear the thatched roofs of the village of Dialamban, where at dawn the spahis are to pitch their camp.

XXV

The land surrounding the camp of Dialamban is desolate—never-ending swamps of stagnant water, alternating with plains of arid sand, yielding a growth of stunted mimosas.

Jean used to take long, solitary walks, with his rifle over his shoulder, shooting or dreaming—ever the same vague reveries of the mountaineer.

It amused him, too, to paddle a pirogue up the banks of the yellow river, or to plunge into the mazes of the creeks of the Senegal.

There were swamps, extending further than the eye could see, where the warm, still waters lay asleep; banks, whose treacherous soil would not support a human foot.

White herons stalked solemnly among the monotonous verdure of the mangroves. Enormous blowing-lizards crawled upon the mud; great water-lilies, white or rose-coloured, unfolded their beauty to the tropic sun, to delight the eyes of alligators and fish-eagles.

. . . . . .

Jean Peyral came near falling in love with this country.

XXVI

. . . . . .

The month of May had come. The spahis were gaily packing up their kit. With enthusiasm they

struck their tents and put together their equipment. They were going back to St Louis to take possession again of their great white barracks, newly repaired and lime-washed, and to pick up again all their old pleasures—mulatto women and absinthe.

The month of May! In our land of France, the lovely month of flowers and greenery! But in the dismal plains of Dialamban May had brought no verdure.

Trees and herbage, every plant not rooted in the yellow water of the swamps, remained blighted, withered, lifeless. For six months not a drop of rain had fallen from the sky, and the land was stricken with dreadful thirst.

And all the time the temperature continued to rise; the strong breezes that used to spring up each evening had ceased; the rainy season was at hand, the season of sultry heat and torrential rain; the season to which each year the Europeans in Senegal look forward with apprehension, as bringing them fever, anæmia, and often death.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to have lived in "the land of thirst" in order to appreciate the delights of this first shower of rain, the joy experienced in exposing oneself to the big drops of this first burst of storm.

O the first tornado! . . . In a leaden, impassive sky like a gloomy vault, a strange weather sign appears, rising above the horizon.

It rises and rises, assuming unusual and terrifying shapes. At first one might imagine it to be the eruption of a gigantic volcano, the explosion of an

entire world. It forms itself into great arches across the sky, ever rising higher, one above the other, with sharply outlined contours, in opaque, heavy masses. One might imagine them vaults of stone about to precipitate themselves upon the world, and the whole is lighted on the under side with metallic gleams, livid, greenish or copper-coloured. And it continues to rise without a check.

The artists who have painted the deluge, the cataclysms of the primeval world, have never conceived scenes so fantastic, skies so terrifying.

And still there is not a breath of air. Nature lies prostrate, without a tremor.

. . . . . .

Suddenly a terrific onslaught of wind, like the crack of a heavy whip, beats to the ground trees, herbage, birds. It whirls the maddened vultures round and round, upsetting everything in its track.

It is the tornado, bursting its chains. All things tremble and reel; nature is convulsed under the terrible might of the hurricane passing on its way.

For perhaps twenty minutes all the sluices of heaven are opened upon the earth. Rain, as of the great flood, refreshes the thirsty soil of Africa, and the wind blows furiously, strewing the earth with leaves, branches, and *débris*.

. . . . . .

Then suddenly all is peace. It is over. The final gusts of wind put to flight the last copper-coloured clouds, and sweep away the tattered shreds of the

cataclysm. The hurricane is over, and the sky is once more clear, impassive, blue.

The first tornado took the spahis by surprise, while they were on the march. There was a laughing, noisy stampede. The village of Touroukambé lay in the way, and they made for it, helter-skelter.

Women who had been pounding millet, children playing in the brush, hens pecking up food, dogs sleeping in the sun, all of them had hurried home, and were herded together beneath the narrow, peaked roofs.

Then the huts, already overcrowded, are invaded by the spahis, who step into calebashes and upset the kouss-kouss. Some kiss the little girls; others peep out-of-doors, like big children, for the pleasure of getting wet and of feeling the rain from heaven trickling down upon their heated, harum-scarum heads. The horses, tethered haphazard, are neighing, pawing the ground, kicking out in terror. Dogs, goats, sheep, all the cattle of the village, are huddled against the doors, yelping, bleating, leaping, thrusting with heads or horns to force an entry—all demanding their share of protection and shelter.

There is a discordant uproar—a mingling of shouts, bursts of laughter from the negresses, the whistling of the storm wind, and the thunder drowning all other sounds with its mighty artillery. Wild confusion prevails beneath the black sky—darkness at midday, pierced by sudden flashes of green lightning; rain in torrents, the deluge pouring down at its pleasure, trickling in through all the chinks in the dried up thatch—here and there administering an

unexpected shower-bath to the back of a curled-up cat, or to a startled chicken, or a spahi's head.

. . . . . .

When the tornado was over, and order re-established, the spahis took the road again, marching along flooded paths. Across the sky flitted the last little curious wisps of cloud, like little parcels of rags and scraps of brown cloth, torn and twisted like curl papers.

Strong, unwonted odours rose from the parched earth, at its contact with these first drops of water. Nature was preparing for new births.

XXVII

Fatou-gaye had posted herself since morning at the entrance to St Louis, so that she might not miss the arrival of the column.

When she saw Jean pass by, she welcomed him with a discreet *keou*, accompanied by a very correct little bow. She did not wish to embarrass him further while he was in the ranks, and she had the good taste to wait two long hours before she came to pay her respects to him in barracks.

Fatou had changed greatly. In three months she had grown and developed a swift maturity like the plants of her native country.

She no longer asked for coppers. She had actually a certain graceful timidity, proper to a young girl.

A bou-bou of white muslin now covered her rounded breasts, as is the custom with young girls

who have come to marriageable age. A strong scent of musk and soumaré hung about her.

Her head no longer displayed its five stiff little tails. She was letting her hair grow, and would presently put herself into the skilful hands of the hairdressers, who would pile up her locks into the complicated erection which is proper to the head of an African woman.

At present her hair was still too short, and it stood out in a dishevelled woolly mass, which gave an entirely new character to her face. Formerly pleasing but comical, it had now become attractive and quaint, almost charming.

She was a mixture of young girl, child, and little black devil—a very odd little person.

"The child is pretty, Peyral, you know," said the spahis smiling.

Jean had noticed, certainly, that she was pretty, but at present this fact interested him very little. He tried to resume quietly his former mode of life, his walks on the beach, and his long expeditions into the country.

The quiet, contemplative months spent in camp had done him good. He had almost regained his moral equilibrium. His memories of his aged parents and of his young betrothed, trustfully waiting for him at home in their village, held him once more with their wholesome charm and influence.

He had done with childish folly and bravado, and now he could not understand how it was that Dame Virginie had come to number him among her clients. He had vowed not only to give up absinthe, but like-

wise to remain faithful to his betrothed until the blissful day of their marriage.

XXVIII

The air was charged with sluggish exhalations, seething with the vital odours and scents of young, growing things. Nature was hastening to carry out her vast plans of procreation.

Formerly, on his first arrival, Jean had cast a general look of repulsion on this black population. In his eyes they all seemed alike; they all wore for him the same simian mask, and under that polished surface of oiled ebony he could not have distinguished one individual from another.

Little by little, however, he had grown accustomed to these faces. Now he could distinguish among them. When he saw the silver-braceletted, black girls go by, he would compare them; one he considered plain, another pretty, one refined, another degraded.

In the end the negresses had for him individual faces, just like white women, and he found them less repulsive than before.

XXIX

June! It was spring time indeed, but a tropical spring time—fleeting, feverish, full of enervating odours and the air heavy with thunder.

Butterflies and birds returned, life was renewed;

the humming birds had cast off their grey dress, and arrayed themselves in their brilliant summer colours. The whole country turned green as if by enchantment; the leafy trees now cast a little shade, warm and soft, upon the moist soil; the mimosas, in full flower, looked like enormous bouquets, with pink or orange sprays, where the humming birds sang in tiny little soft voices, like the muted twittering of swallows. Even the clumsy baobabs had put on for a few days fresh leaves of pale, delicate green. . . .

The plains were carpeted with strange flowers, wild grasses, daturas with large, scent-laden calyces. And the showers that watered all things were warm and fragrant, and at evening, above the tall grasses sprung up overnight, the ephemeral fire-flies danced their rounds, like sparks of phosphorus.

Nature had been so impatient to bring forth all this abundance that in a single week she had exhausted all her gifts.

XXX

In his evening walks, Jean invariably came upon little Fatou, Fatou with a head like a woolly, black lamb. Her hair grew quickly—like the grasses—and soon the skilful hairdressers would be able to make something of it.

XXXI

Marriages were frequent during this spring time. Often at evening, during those enervating June

nights, Jean would meet these marriage processions meandering across the sands in long fantastic trains. Every one was singing, and the chorus of all these falsetto, monkey-like voices had a syncopated accompaniment of handclapping and tom-toms. There was something ponderously voluptuous, brutishly sensual in these songs and this negro gaiety.

Jean used often to visit his friend Nyaor at Guet n'dar, and the scenes of Yolof family life and domesticity disturbed him. . . . How lonely he felt, cut off from his own people in this accursed country! . . . He thought of Jeanne Méry, the girl whom he loved with the pure affection of childhood. . . . Alas! he had only been six months in Africa. . . . More than four years to wait until he saw her again! . . . He began to say to himself that perhaps the courage to endure his solitary existence might fail him, that soon at all costs he might need someone to help him to pass his term of exile. . . . But whom? . . .

Fatou-gaye perhaps? . . . Oh come! . . . what profanation of himself! . . . Was he to resemble his comrades, old Virginie's customers? . . . To maltreat like them little black girls? . . . He had a kind of self-respect, instinctive modesty, which had hitherto preserved him from such degradation; he could never stoop so low.

XXXII

He took a walk every evening. He took a great many walks. . . . Thunder showers still fell. . . .

The immense, evil-smelling swamps, the stagnant waters saturated with feverish miasma covered a wider area every day. This country of sand was now overgrown with tall, grassy vegetation. . . .

The evening sun was pale as if exhausted by excessive heat and noxious emanations. . . .

At the setting of that yellow sun, when Jean found himself alone in the midst of these desolate marshes, where so many strange new things worked upon his imagination, he was possessed by inexplicable sadness. . . . He cast his eyes all around the wide, flat landscape, overhung with motionless vapours; he could not understand what there was in the aspect of things, so mournful and so abnormal, thus to oppress his heart.

Above the damp grass floated clouds of dragon flies, with great black-spotted wings, while birds whose song was strange to him called plaintively to one another among the tall grasses. . . . And the eternal melancholy of this land of Ham brooded over everything.

In these twilight hours of spring time these African marshes are steeped in a melancholy that no human tongue could express. . . .

. . . . . .

XXXIII

Anamalis fobil! shrieked the *griots*, as, with eyes inflamed, muscles taut, bodies dripping with sweat, they beat their tom-toms.

And the whole assembly, frenziedly clapping their hands, repeated *Anamalis fobil! Anamalis fobil!* . . . words whose translation would blister these pages. . . . "Anamalis fobil!" the first words, the motive and refrain of a diabolical song, delirious with licentious passion, the song of the spring *bamboulas*. . . .

Anamalis fobil! the howling of frenzied desire of the sap of negroes heated to excess by the sun, of burning hysteria . . . the negro's alleluia of love, a hymn of seduction chanted likewise by nature, air, earth, plants, and scents.

At the spring *bamboulas*, the young men mingled with the young girls who had just arrayed themselves in the pomp of their wedding finery. To a maddening rhythm, to a frantic melody, they all sang, as they danced upon the sand, *Anamalis fobil!* . . .

XXXIV

Anamalis fobil! All the big, milky buds on the baobabs had burst into tender leaf. . . .

And Jean felt this negro spring-time burning in his blood, flowing like a consuming poison through his veins. . . .

He was exhausted by all this renewal of life, because it was a life in which he had no part. The blood that boiled in men's veins was black; the sap that rose in the plants was poisonous; the perfume of the flowers was dangerous, and the insects were swollen with venom.

In him, too, the sap was rising, the sap of his two-

and-twenty years, but with a feverishness that exhausted the source from which it sprang, and in the end this terrible renascence would have brought him to the verge of death.

Anamalis fobil! How rapidly this spring advanced! . . . June was scarcely over, and already, under the influence of deadly heat, in an atmosphere no longer endurable, the leaves were turning yellow, the plants were dying, and the sere grasses drooped earthwards. . . .

XXXV

Anamalis fobil! . . . There are in hot countries certain fruits of harsh and bitter flavour—such as the gourous of Senegal—that are detestable to the palate in our cool latitudes, but which, out there, appeal to the taste in special conditions of thirst or ill-health. You may have a passionate craving for them, and they may seem to you curiously delicious.

It was the same with that little creature with her shock of black sheep's wool, her body of sculptured marble, and her glittering eyes, already fully aware of what they asked of Jean, yet downcast in his presence with a childish pretence of timid modesty.

This highly-flavoured fruit of the Soudan was precociously ripened by the tropical spring, bursting with poisonous juices, rife with morbid voluptuousness, febrile and foreign.

. . . . . .

XXXVI

Anamalis fobil!

Jean had dressed for the evening hastily, almost frenziedly.

That morning he had told Fatou to go at nightfall to the foot of a certain solitary baobab in the marshes of Sorr, and to wait for him there.

. . . . . .

Then, before setting out, he had leaned on his elbow at one of the large windows of the barracks, troubled in mind, trying to think—to think, if that were possible, while he drew a few breaths of less oppressive air. He shuddered at the thing he was about to do.

If he had withstood temptation for several days, his resistance was due to the very complicated emotions struggling within him. A kind of instinctive horror still mingled with the terrible urgency of his senses. And superstition, too, played a part, the superstition inborn in a mountaineer, a vague dread of charms and amulets, horror of I know not what enchantments, what bonds of darkness.

It seemed to him that he was about to cross the fatal threshold, to sign some sort of sinister pact with that black race, that darker veils would descend, separating him from his mother and his betrothed and all that he had loved and regretted in his home overseas.

The warm twilight sank upon the river; the old, white town turned rosy in the light, blue in the

shadows; long lines of camels were wending their way across the plain, moving northwards to the desert.

Already in the distance could be heard the griots' tom-toms beginning, and the song of frantic desires. *Anamalis fobil!—Faramata hi!*

The hour of his assignation with Fatou-gaye was almost past. Jean set off at a run to join her in the marshes of Sorr.

. . . . . .

A solitary baobab cast its shadow upon their strange nuptials. The saffron sky stretched above them its impassive vault, melancholy, oppressive, laden with electricity, with terrestrial emanations and vital elements.

To paint that nuptial couch would require warmer tints than any palette could provide—African words, sounds, rustling noises, and, above all, silence, all the odours of Senegal, tempest, sombre fire, transparency, obscurity.

And yet there was nothing to be seen, save a single, solitary baobab in the midst of a great, grassy plain.

Mingled with his delirious infatuation, Jean still felt a sort of secret horror, as he saw, contrasting with the background of dusky twilight, the intenser blackness of his bride; as he saw, close to his own, the glitter of Fatou's rolling eyes.

Great bats flitted noiselessly above them, their silken-winged flight seemed like the rapid fluttering of black cloth. They flew so low that they brushed

them with their wings, their bat-like curiosity greatly excited by Fatou's garment of white cotton, which showed up on the parched grass.

Anamalis fobil! . . . Faramata hi! . . .

. . . . . .

PART II

I

. . . . . .

. . . Three years had passed. . . .

Three times the terrible spring and the cold weather season had come again; three times the "season of thirst," with its cold nights, its wind from the desert. . . .

. . . Jean was lying asleep on his *tara* in his white-washed lodging in Samba-Hamet's house. Near him lay his yellow dog, motionless, with open eyes, his paws straight out in front of him, his head on his paws, his tongue hanging out thirstily; he resembled in attitude and expression those hieratic pictures of jackals in Egyptian temples.

And Fatou-gaye lay on the ground at Jean's feet.

It was noon, the still hour of the siesta. . . . It was hot, very hot, extraordinarily hot. Call to mind the most overpowering noons you have known in July, and imagine a far greater heat and an intenser light.

It was a December day. The wind blew very softly from the desert, with its unvarying regularity. Everything was withered and dead. The wind traced upon the sand thousands and thousands of

little wavy fluctuating streaks, like tiny ripples on the great sea without water.

. . . . . .

Fatou-gaye was lying face downwards, resting on her elbows. The upper part of her body was bare (her indoor costume), and her smooth back sloped upwards in a graceful curve from her shapely hips to the extraordinary erection of amber and coral which crowned her head.

Around Samba-Hamet's hut there was silence, the rustling movements of lizards, the buzzing of flies, the shimmering of sand.

Fatou, half asleep, with her chin resting on her two hands, was singing to herself. She sang airs she had never heard sung, which were, nevertheless, not of her own composing. They were the expression, in strange, drowsy music, of her languid dreams, her voluptuous lassitude; reflex action, the effect produced upon her young negro girl's brain by all that weight of circumstances, manifesting itself in song.

In that sonorous hour of noon, in that feverish half-sleep of the siesta, how plaintive are the vibrations of such a song, the vague, unconsidered result of circumstances, a musical paraphrase of silence, heat, solitude, exile.

. . . . . .

Jean and Fatou have made peace. As usual, Jean has forgiven her. The trouble about the *khâliss* and the earrings of Galam gold is all over.

The money has been procured elsewhere and sent to France. It was Nyaor who lent it, in large silver coins with very ancient effigies, which he had kept locked up with many others in a copper chest. The debt will be paid as soon as possible. True, it is another weight on Jean's mind, but at least his dear old parents, who had counted on him, will not lack. Their minds will be at ease. The rest is not so important.

Sleeping on his *tara* with his slave lying at his feet, Jean has a certain superb nonchalance, a certain counterfeit air of Arab prince. There is no trace remaining of the little mountaineer from the Cevennes. He has acquired something of the beggarly majesty of those men who dwell in tents.

These three years in Senegal, which have already thinned the ranks of the spahis, have spared him. His face is bronzed; his strength has developed; his features are more refined, and their original delicacy and beauty still more accentuated.

A certain lack of moral tone, periods of indifference and oblivion, a kind of insensibility of the heart, alternating suddenly with painful awakenings—such are the sole effects that these three years have succeeded in producing upon him. The climate of Senegal has gained no further hold upon his powerful nature.

He has by degrees developed into a model soldier, punctual, vigilant, brave. And yet he still wears only humble, woollen stripes on his sleeve. The gold stripes of quartermaster, which have often been dangled before his eyes, have always been refused

him. To bgin with, he has no influence, and then, above all, there is the scandal of living with a black woman. . . . To get drunk, to go on the racket, to be brought back with a broken head, to commit drunken assaults by night with one's sabre on passers-by, to roam from tavern to tavern, to stoop to all kinds of degradation—that sort of thing is all very well.

But to have turned from the path of virtue—simply for one's own private pleasure—a small captive living in a respectable house, and provided with the sacrament of baptism—such a thing cannot be tolerated. . . .

Formerly Jean used to receive very violent reproofs on this subject from his superior officers, combined with terrible threats and insults. He had uncovered his proud head to the storm, and then he had listened with the stoicism demanded by discipline, concealing under a certain semblance of contrition a wild desire to avail himself of his riding whip.

Yet, for all that, he did not alter his course of conduct by a hair's breadth. . . .

A little more dissimulation was practised, perhaps, for a few days. But he kept Fatou.

His feelings on the subject of that little creature were so complicated that wiser men than he would have wasted their energy trying to analyse them. As for Jean, he surrendered himself without understanding, as if to the beguiling charm of a love-philtre. He had not the strength to part from her. The veil that lay upon his past and his memories grew gradually denser; now he followed unresisting the

dictates of the perturbed, irresolute heart that separation and exile had led astray. . . .

And day after day, day after day, always that same sun! To see it rising every morning at the same hour with relentless regularity, bare of clouds, with none of the freshness of dawn—this sun, yellow or red, which the flatness of the landscape rendered visible, as at sea, from its first appearance above the horizon, and which, scarcely risen, began to convey to head and temples a painful, impressive sensation of burning heat.

. . . . . .

For two years now Jean and Fatou had lived together in Samba-Hamet's house. In the spahis' quarters, the authorities, tired of opposition, had finally acquiesced in an evil they were powerless to abolish. After all, Jean Peyral was a model spahi; only it was an understood thing that he would always remain wedded to his modest woollen stripes, and that he would never attain higher rank.

Fatou had been a captive, not a slave, in Cora's house—a fundamental distinction laid down by the regulations of the colony, and of which she had grasped the meaning at a very early day. As a captive she had the right to go away, although her mistress had not the right to turn her out. Once she had gone away of her own choice she was free —and she had availed herself of this right.

Moreover, she had been baptized, and this gave her still greater freedom of action. Her small head, as cunning as a young monkey's, had realised this

fact, and had fully grasped the situation. For any woman, who has not renounced the religion of Maghreb, to give herself to a white man is an ignominious act, punished by all the execrations of the mob. But in Fatou's case this fatal barrier of public opinion no longer existed.

It is true that her comrades sometimes called her "Kaffir!" and this hurt her feelings, curious child that she was. When she saw bands of Khassonkés arriving from the interior, recognising them from afar by their high headdress, she would run to them, shy and moved, hovering about these tall men with their manes of hair, anxious to talk to them in the beloved language of their common country. (Negroes have the love of their village, of their tribe, of the corner of the earth where they were born.) And sometimes at a word from a spiteful little comrade, the black men from the Khassonké country would turn away their heads with contempt, throwing at her with an indescribable smile and curl of the lips the word "Kaffir" (infidel), which is the equivalent of the Algerian *roumi* and the Oriental *giaour*. Then little Fatou would go away, ashamed, and with a swelling heart. . . .

But, nonetheless, she preferred to be a Kaffir, and to possess Jean. . . .

. . . Poor Jean, sleep long on your light tara; draw out this noonday hour of rest, this heavy dreamless sleep, for the moment of waking is full of gloom. . . .

Oh that awakening from the torpor of the midday sleep! Whence came that strange lucidity of

mind which made this moment so terrifying? . . . His ideas began to waken, mournful, confused, incomplete—at first mere inconsequent shadowy conceptions, full of mystery, like traces of a previous existence. Then suddenly dawned conceptions of greater and agonising clearness. Radiant memories of old days, impressions of childhood, came back to him, rising from the depths of his irrevocable past, memories of thatched cottages, of the Cevennes on summer evenings, mingled with stridulation of African crickets; the agony of separations, of lost happiness, a swift and harrowing survey of his whole past, the events of life seen from beneath, like things beyond the tomb—the other side of existence, the obverse of this world.

. . . In these moments, especially, he seemed to be conscious of the rapid and inexorable flight of time, which the tonelessness of his spirit did not usually permit him to grasp. He woke up, hearing against the resonant *tara* the faint throbbing of the arteries in his forehead, and he seemed to be listening to the pulsations of time, the vibrations of a great mysterious time-piece of eternity. He had the sensation that the moments were gliding by, passing, passing with the speed of objects falling into empty space, while the stream of his life bore him ever onwards, and he was powerless to stem it. . . .

He rose abruptly, now wide awake, with a wild longing to be gone, in an agony of despair at the thought of the years that still lay between him and his return.

. . . . . .

Fatou-gaye had a vague instinct that this instant of awakening was a dangerous and critical time when the white man evaded her influence. So she was on the watch for this moment, and when she saw Jean open his mournful eyes, and then suddenly start up with a bewildered look, she would quickly come and kneel beside him to minister to him, or she would put her supple arms round his neck and say,

" What is the matter, my white man? " in a voice which she rendered as soft and languishing as the sound of a griot's guitar.

. . . But these fancies of Jean did not last long. When he was wide awake his usual indifference possessed him once more, and he saw things again in their normal aspect.

II

. . . The operation of dressing Fatou's hair was a very important and complicated one. It took place once a week, and on this occasion the whole day was given up to it. In the early morning Fatou set out for Guet n'dar, the negro village, where in a hut with peaked roof, built of thatch and dry reeds, dwelt the hairdresser of most repute among the Nubian ladies.

Fatou remained there for several hours, crouched on the sand, surrendering herself into the hands of this patient, painstaking artist.

The hairdresser began by pulling down Fatou's previous arrangement of hair, unthreading the beads one by one, loosening and disentangling the thick

locks. Then she reconstructed that amazing edifice, introducing coral, gold coins, copper spangles, balls of green jade and balls of amber—balls of amber as big as apples, Fatou's maternal inheritance of precious family jewels, brought secretly into the land of captivity.

The most complicated part to dress was the back of the head, the nape of the neck. There Fatou's woolly masses had to be divided into hundreds of little corkscrew curls, starched and rigid, carefully ordered, resembling rows of black fringes.

Each of these corkscrew curls was rolled separately round a long straw and covered with a thick layer of gum. To give this coating time to dry, the straws had to remain in place until the next day. Fatou stayed at home with all these straws sticking out of her hair. She looked that evening as if she had put her head into a porcupine's skin.

But what a splendid effect the next day, when the straws were removed! . . .

Over this erection was thrown, in Khassonké fashion, a piece of a very transparent kind of gauze made by the natives, covering it like a blue spider's web, and this headdress remained firmly fixed day and night for a whole week.

Fatou-gaye wore dainty little sandals of leather, like the cothurnus of the ancients, with thongs passing between the first and second toes.

Her dress consisted of the scanty, tight-fitting *pagne*, which the Egyptians of the time of the Pharaohs bequeathed to Nubia. Above this she wore a *boubou*, a great square of muslin with a hole

for the head, and falling like a peplus below the knees.

For ornaments she had heavy silver rings, riveted on wrists and ankles, and besides these, scented necklets of soumaré, for Jean's slender means did not suffice for the purchase of necklets of amber or gold.

Soumarés are plaits, consisting of several rows of threaded little brown seeds. These seeds that ripen on the banks of the Gambia have a penetrating, aromatic odour, an odour peculiar to themselves, one of the most characteristic odours of Senegal.

Fatou-gaye was very pretty with this towering, barbaric headdress, which gave her the appearance of a Hindu deity, decked out for a religious festival. Her face had none of the characteristics, the flat nose, the thick lips, of certain African tribes, which in France are taken for the generic type of the entire black race. She was of a very pure Khassonké type, with a little, straight, delicate nose, with thin, rather narrow, very sensitive nostrils, a well-shaped, charming mouth, splendid teeth, and above all, great, lustrous, blue-black eyes, expressing, according to the mood of the moment, a curious gaiety or a mysterious malice.

III

Fatou never did any work. Jean had presented himself with a perfect odalisque.

She knew how to wash and mend her *boubous* and *pagnes*. She was always as spotless as a black

cat, dressed in white, partly from an instinct of cleanliness, partly because she realised that Jean would not tolerate her otherwise. But apart from this care of her person, she was incapable of any work.

Since the poor old Peyrals were no longer able to send their son the small sums that little by little they had saved for him, since " nothing had gone well with them," as old Françoise had written, so that they had even been obliged to have recourse to the spahi's slender purse, Fatou's budget was becoming very difficult to balance.

Fortunately, Fatou was a steady little person, whose mode of life was not extravagant.

Throughout the Soudan, woman is in a position of great inferiority as compared to man.

Several times in the course of her life she is bought and sold like a head of cattle, and at a price which is estimated at inverse ratio to her ugliness, defects, and increasing age.

One day Jean asked his friend Nyaor,

" What have you done with your wife Nokhoudounkhotillé, the one who was so good-looking? "

And Nyaor replied, with a quiet smile,

" Nokhoudounkhotillé talked too much, so I sold her. With the money I got for her I bought thirty sheep who never talk at all."

The hardest work done by the negroes, the task of pounding millet for the kouss-kouss, devolves upon the women.

From morning till night, throughout Nubia, from Timbuctoo to the coast of Guinea, in all the thatched huts, under the burning sun, the negresses' wooden

pestles are noisily pounding in the mortars of khaya wood. Thousands of braceletted arms weary themselves at this task, and the chattering, quarrelsome workers mingle with this monotonous sound their chorus of shrill voices, which seem to come from the throats of monkeys.

The result is a very characteristic hubbub, audible from afar in the thickets and desert tracts leading to these African villages.

The result of this eternal pounding, which has been practised by the women for generations, is a coarse flour of millet, which is made into a flavourless kind of gruel called *kouss-kouss*.

Kouss-kouss is the basis of the nourishment of the black races.

Fatou evaded this traditional labour of the women of her race. Every evening she paid a visit to Coura n'diaye, the woman griot, the ancient poetess of King El Hadj.

In return for a small monthly payment Fatou had the right to sit among the little slaves of the old favourite around great calabashes, smoking with hot *kouss-kouss*, and to satisfy the appetite of her sixteen years.

From her raised position on her *tara*, where she lay upon fine mats of complicated design, the old cast-off favourite presided with imperturbable dignity.

Yet these repasts were uproarious scenes well worth witnessing. These small, naked creatures crouched on the ground around huge calabashes, all dipping their fingers at the same time into the Spartan

brew. There were cries, wry faces, grimaces, tricks that would have made an ouistiti jealous, untimely invasions of great horned sheep; cats stealthily stretching their paws out and then slily dipping them in the gruel; intruding yellow dogs pushing their pointed noses into the dish, and then bursts of laughter, incredibly comic, displaying magnificent white teeth set in gums as red as peonies.

Jean had always to be back in barracks at four o'clock, but by the time he returned to his lodging after retreat had been sounded, Fatou was always dressed again, and her hands were clean. Beneath her towering headdress, which resembled that of an idol, she had assumed once more a serious, almost melancholy, expression. She was no longer the same person.

It was dreary at eventide in this desolate quarter, in this isolated corner of the dead-alive town.

Jean would often remain leaning on his elbow at the big window of his bare, white room.

The sea brezee fluttered the scraps of priests' parchments which Fatou had hung by long threads from the ceiling, as a protection to them during their sleep.

Before him lay the wide landscape of Senegal—the Point of Barbary, an immense plain, with the heavy vapours of twilight brooding above it in the distance, the deep gateway to the desert.

Or else he would sit in the doorway of Samba-Hamet's house, facing that characterless rectangle of ground, surrounded by old brick buildings in ruins, a kind of square, in the middle of which grew that

meagre, yellow palm, of the thorny species, the only tree in the quarter.

Here he would sit smoking the cigarettes which he had taught Fatou to make for him.

Alas! even this form of distraction he would soon have to think of relinquishing for lack of funds.

He followed with his large, brown, lustreless eyes the coming and going of two or three little negro girls, who were chasing one another, gambolling wildly in the evening air, like moths in the dim half light.

Sunset in December almost invariably brought to St Louis fresh breezes and great curtains of clouds that suddenly darkened the sky, but never burst. They passed over, high above, and glided away. Never a drop of rain, never the slightest sensation of humidity; it was the dry season, and in all nature not one drop of water vapour could have been found. Still, it was possible to breathe on these December evenings; the penetrating coolness brought respite and a sensation of physical relief, but at the same time created an indefinable impression of deeper melancholy.

And when Jean was seated at nightfall in front of his lonely threshold, his thoughts travelled far afield.

These flights which his eyes, darting hither and thither like a bird, would make each day on the big geographical maps that hung on the walls of the spahi's barracks, he would often resume again in spirit, especially of an evening, traversing a sort of panorama of the world, as it presented itself to his imagination.

First he must cross the great sombre desert, which began just behind his house.

It was this first part of the journey that his imagination was most slow in accomplishing. It would be delayed in an infinity of mysterious solitudes, where that interminable waste of sand impeded his progress.

Then he had to cross Algiers and the Mediterranean, reach the coast of France and ascend the valley of the Rhône, to arrive at last at that spot, marked on the map with little black shadings, which he envisaged as blue-tinged peaks, seen among the clouds : the Cevennes.

Mountains! His eyes had been so long accustomed to the lonely plains; it was so long since he had seen any mountains that he had almost forgotten what they were like.

And forests! The great chestnut woods of his country, moist and shadowy, where real streams of living water ran, where the soil was earth, carpeted with moss and delicate grasses. . . . He felt that it would be a relief merely to see a small clod of damp, mossy earth—instead of the dry sand blown about by the desert wind.

And his beloved village, which in his imaginary journey he beheld at first from above, as if he were hovering over it, the old church, which he pictured under snow, with its bell doubtless ringing the Angelus (it was seven in the evening), and close by, his cottage—the whole scene enveloped in a bluish haze, on a cold December evening, with rays of pale moonlight glancing upon it.

Was it possible? Somewhere all this actually existed; it was not a mere memory, a vision of the past; it existed; it was not even so very far away; actually at this moment people were living in that very spot, and it was possible to go there.

. . . . . .

What were they doing, his poor old parents, at this very moment when he was thinking of them? Seated in a corner by the fire, no doubt, in front of the wide fireplace, by the cheerful blaze of branches gathered in the forest. He saw again all the objects familiar to him from childhood, the little lamp lighted on winter evenings, the pieces of old furniture; the cat curled up asleep on a stool. Among all these friendly things he sought to place the well-beloved owners of the cottage.

Nearly seven o'clock! He had the very picture before him. The evening meal was over; his parents were seated in a corner by the fire, grown older, no doubt; his aged father in his usual attitude, leaning on his hand his fine grey head—the head of an old cuirassier turned mountaineer again—and his mother probably knitting, moving her long needles very rapidly in her capable, quick, hard-working hands, or spinning, with her distaff of hemp held very upright.

And Jeanne—she was with them perhaps. His mother had written that she would often come and keep them company on winter evenings. What was she like now? "Changed and grown still prettier," he had been told. What was that face

like now, that face of the grown-up girl he had never seen?

. . . . . .

By the side of the handsome spahi in his red jacket sat Fatou with her high headdress of amber and copper spangles.

Night had fallen, and in the lonely square the little negro girls continued to chase one another, flitting hither and thither in the dusk—one of them entirely nude—the other two looking like white bats with their long floating *boubous*.

The cold wind incited them to run; they were like kittens in our country, who feel an impulse to gambol wildly when the dry east wind is blowing, which brings us frost.

IV

A pedantic digression concerning music and a class of people called Griots.

. . . . . .

In the Soudan the art of music is confined to a special hereditary caste of men called griots, who are wandering musicians and composers of heroic songs.

It is the griots upon whom devolves the duty of beating the tom-tom for the *bamboulas*, and of singing at festivals the praises of persons of quality.

When a chief feels a craving to hear the praises of his own glory, he summons his griots, who seat themselves before him on the sand and extemporise in his honour a long series of special couplets, accom-

panying their strident voices with the sounds of a small, very primitive guitar, whose strings are strung over serpent skin.

The griots are at once the laziest and the most philosophical people on earth. They lead a roaming life, and take no thought for the morrow. From village to village they wander, either alone or in the train of the great warrior chiefs, receiving alms here and there, treated everywhere as pariahs, like the gipsies in Europe—sometimes loaded with gold and favours, like courtesans in our country—excluded during their lifetime from religious ceremonies, and after death from burial grounds.

They know plaintive romances with vague mysterious words, heroic songs which hold a suggestion of melody in their monotony and something of the war-like march in their well-marked vigorous rhythm; dance music full of frenzy; love songs like transports of amorous fury, or the roaring of maddened beasts.

But in all this negro music, as in that of all primitive races, the melody varies little; it consists of short, mournful phrases, scales of more or less unequal intervals, beginning with the highest notes within the compass of the human voice and descending abruptly to the very lowest, in a dragging, plaintive wail.

The negro women often sing at their work, or during that listless half-sleep, which constitutes their siesta. In that intense stillness of noon, a stillness more impressive out there than that in our fields of France, this singing of Nubian women, with the

eternal stridulation of grasshoppers for its accompaniment, has a charm of its own. But it would be impossible to transport this singing from its exotic environment of sun and sand. Heard in other surroundings it would no longer be itself.

The more primitive, the more elusive the melody appears by reason of its monotony, the more difficult and complicated is the rhythm. As the long wedding processions one meets at night meander over the sands, they sing, under the leadership of the griots, concerted choral music, weird in character, and the persistent, syncopated accompaniment seems, as if of its own sweet will, to bristle with rhythmic difficulties and eccentricities.

A very simple instrument, reserved for the women, plays an important part in this ensemble; it is merely a long-shaped gourd, with an opening at one end; this gourd is beaten with the hand, now on the side, now on the opening, and two different tones are thus produced, one sharp, one dull. It yields no other sound, but the result obtained in this manner is nonetheless surprising.

It is difficult to describe the sinister, almost diabolical effect, of a distant clamour of negro voices, half-drowned by hundreds of these instruments.

The persistent counter-rhythm of the accompaniment and the startling syncopations, perfectly understood and observed by the performers, are the chief characteristics of this form of music—inferior perhaps to our own, certainly very different from it, and such as our European tradition does not enable us wholly to appreciate.

V

BAMBOULA

A passing griot raps out a tattoo on his tom-tom. This is the summons, and a crowd gathers around him.

Women come running; they form themselves into a close circle, and begin to intone one of those obscene songs which rouse them to passionate excitement. One of them, the first arrival, breaks away from the crowd and hurls herself into the unoccupied centre of the circle, where the tambour is sounding. She dances, jingling her *grigris* and beads; her steps, which are slow at the beginning, are accompanied by gestures appallingly licentious. Soon the pace is accelerated until a state of frenzy is reached, which might be likened to the antics of an insane monkey, the contortions of one possessed.

When she comes to the end of her strength, she retires breathless and exhausted, her black skin gleaming with sweat. Her companions receive her with applause or derision. Then another takes her place, and so on, until all have had their turn.

The old women are distinguished by a more cynical and reckless effrontery of indecency. The child that is frequently carried on their backs is tossed about in a terrible way, and utters piercing shrieks, but on these occasions the negresses have lost even their maternal instinct, and no consideration restrains them.

In all the districts of Senegal the rising of the full

moon is the time especially dedicated to the bamboula, to the evenings of the great negro festivals, and above that vast expanse of sand, in the infinite depths of these shimmering horizons, a moon rises that seems larger and ruddier than elsewhere.

At the close of day the people gather together in groups. On these occasions the women wear bright-coloured *pagnes*, and bedeck themselves with ornaments of fine Galam gold. Their arms are covered with heavy bracelets of silver, and their necks with an astonishing profusion of *grigris* and beads of amber and coral.

And when the red disk of the moon appears, ever magnified and distorted by mirage, casting up the horizon broad, blood-red streaks of light, a frantic clamour bursts from the whole assembly. This announces the festival.

At certain seasons of the year the square in front of Samba-Hamet's house became the scene of fantastic *bamboulas*.

On these occasions, Coura n'diaye would lend Fatou some of her precious jewels to wear at the festival.

Sometimes she herself graced it with her presence as in old days.

And then there would be a general murmur of admiration when the ancient griot stepped forward, decked with gold, her head held high, with a strange light rekindled in her dim eyes. Her body was shamelessly exposed; her bosom, wrinkled like that of a black mummy, and her breasts, which hung down like pouches of skin, empty and withered, displayed

the wonderful gifts of El Hadj, the conqueror; necklets of jade of the pale green of water, and besides these, rows upon rows of great beads of fine gold of rare and inimitable workmanship. Her arms and ankles were covered with gold; she wore gold rings upon all her toes, and upon her head an antique erection of gold.

The old bedizened image set herself to sing. By degrees she became more and more excited, waving her skeleton arms, which could scarcely support the weight of the bracelets. Her hoarse, cavernous voice seemed at first to issue from the depths of a lifeless corpse, but presently its vibrations gained a shuddering intensity.

One listened, as it were, to a posthumous echo of the voice of the poetess of El Hadj; and her dilated eyes, shining with an inner light, seemed to reveal like a mirror glimpses of the great legendary wars waged in the interior of the land, and of the great days of old; the armies of El Hadj swooping down on the desert; the terrible massacres, when entire tribes were given to the vultures; the assault on Ségou-Koro, all the villages of Massina, covering hundreds of miles of country between Medina and Timbuctoo, going up in flames in the sunshine, like grass in a prairie fire.

. . . . . .

Coura n'diaye was very weary when her songs were done. She returned home trembling in every limb, and lay down on her couch. When her little slaves had stripped her of her jewels, and had gently

massaged her to soothe her to sleep, she was left there motionless as a corpse, and she continued prostrate for two days.

VI

Guet n'dar, the negro town, was built of grey straw on yellow sand—thousands and thousands of little round huts half hidden behind palisades of dry reeds, and all capped with roofs of thatch. All the peaks of these thousands of roofs affected pointedness in all its extravagance. Some stood upright, menacing heaven; others leaned sideways and menaced their neighbours; others again were tun-bellied, collapsing, seemingly weary of their long drying in the sun, and anxious to shrivel and to roll themselves up like the trunks of old elephants. And all these roofs stretched away out of sight, printing grotesque silhouettes of horned objects upon the monotonous blue sky.

North and south through the middle of Guet n'dar, dividing the town into two parts, runs a long sandy street, very straight and regular, widening out in the distance, until it is lost in the desert. The desert does double duty as landscape and horizon.

On either side of this vast opening lies a maze of tortuous alleys, twisted like the paths of a labyrinth.

To this quarter Fatou has guided Jean, leading him, in negro fashion, by one of his fingers, which she clasps in her firm, little black hand, adorned with copper rings.

It is seven o'clock on a January morning, and the

sun scarcely risen. At this hour, even in Senegal, the air is pleasant and fresh.

Jean walks along with his proud, sedate bearing, smiling inwardly at the absurdity of the expedition he has undertaken at Fatou's desire, and of the personage whom he is going to visit.

Good-humouredly he allows himself to be led along; the walk interests and amuses him.

The weather is fine. The pure air of the morning, the sense of physical well-being produced by this unusual coolness, has a soothing influence upon him. And at this moment, Fatou seems to him very charming, and he is almost in love with her.

This is one of those fugitive and singular moments when memory slumbers, and this land of Africa seems to smile upon him; when the spahi surrenders himself without gloomy afterthought to the life which for three years has soothed and lulled him into a heavy, dangerous sleep, haunted by sinister dreams.

The morning air is fresh and pure. Behind the grey palisades of reeds, which border the narrow streets of Guet n'dar, are heard the first sounds of the *kouss-kouss* pounders, mingled with the sudden clamour of voices of just awakened negroes, and the noise of jingling beads. At each street corner are skulls of horned sheep (for the benefit of those versed in negro customs, the heads of victims of the *tabaski*) set up on tall poles, watching all the passers-by, and seemingly stretching out their wooden necks for the sake of a better view.

And settled everywhere are great fetish lizards with sky-blue bodies, swaying perpetually from side

to side, with the curious twitching peculiar to their species; their heads, which are of a beautiful yellow, as if made of orange peel.

The air is full of the odours of negroes, of leather amulets, of *kouss-kouss*, and of soumaré.

Small negro children begin to show themselves at the doors; their round bellies with projecting navels are adorned with a row of blue beads; they smile from ear to ear, and their pear-shaped heads are shaven, except for three little tails.

They all stretch themselves, gazing at Jean with a look of astonishment in their great, shining eyes, and sometimes the most daring of them say, "Toubab! toubab! toubab! good-morning!"

. . . . . .

All this savours of the country of exile and of remoteness from home; the smallest details of the smallest things are strange. But there is such magic in these tropical sunrises, such limpidity in the air this morning, such a sense of well-being produced by this unusual coolness, that Jean replies gaily to the good mornings of the negro babies, smiles at Fatou's remarks, surrenders himself, and forgets.

The person whom Jean and Fatou were going to visit was a tall, old man with sly, crafty eyes, called Samba-Latir.

When they were both seated on mats on the ground in their host's hut, Fatou began to speak, and expounded her case, which was, as will be seen, a serious and complicated one.

For several days she had been meeting, always at

the same hour, a certain very ugly old woman, who looked at her in a curious way out of the corner of her eye, without turning her head. . . . At last yesterday evening, she had returned home in tears, assuring Jean that she felt that she had been bewitched.

And all night long she had been obliged to hold her head in water to counteract the immediate effects of the spell.

In the collection of amulents that she possessed, there were charms against all kinds of ills or accidents; against bad dreams and vegetable poisons; against dangerous falls and the venom of insects; against the wanderings of Jean's affections and damage by white ants; against colic and alligators. But there were as yet no amulet against the evil eye and the spells that people cast upon you in the street.

Now amulets of this kind were known to be a specialty of Samba-Latir, and it was for this reason that Fatou had had recourse to him.

Samba-Latir had the very thing. He drew from an old mysterious coffer a small red sachet, attached to a leather cord; he hung it round Fatou-gaye's neck, pronouncing sacramental words—and the evil spirit was exorcised.

It only cost two silver *khâliss* (ten francs). And the spahi, who did not know how to bargain, not even for an amulet, paid without a murmur. Nevertheless he felt the blood rising in his temples as he saw the two coins vanish, not that he cared about the money—for he had never learnt to appreciate the value of money—but just now two *khâliss* was a

heavy tax upon his slender spahi's purse. And above all, he said to himself with a remorseful pang, his old parents no doubt denied themselves many things which cost less than two *khâliss*, and were certainly more useful than Fatou's amulets.

VII

Letter from Jeanne Méry to her cousin Jean.

My dear Jean,—It is almost three years now since your departure, and I am always expecting you to talk to me about your return; I myself have faith in you, you see, and I know that you would never deceive me. But that does not prevent the time from seeming very long. There are nights when I feel very unhappy, and all kinds of ideas come into my head. Besides this, my parents say that if you had really wanted to do so, you could have taken leave and paid us a visit. I am pretty sure, too, that there are people here in the village who stir them up, but it is true, all the same, that our cousin Pierre came home twice while he was doing his term of soldiering.

There are people who spread a report that I am going to marry that big gaby Suirot. What an idea! How odd it would be to marry that great booby who plays the gentleman. I let them talk, because I know that no one in the world can be the same to me as my dear Jean.

You can be quite easy; there is no fear of their persuading me to go to balls; I do not mind their saying that I give myself airs. To dance with Suirot or that great blockhead Toinon or others like him—no, thank you. In the evening I sit very quietly on the bench in front of Rose's door, and there I think and think of my dear Jean, who is worth all the others put together, and you may be sure I am never weary of thinking of him.

Thank you for your portrait; it is just like you, although they say here that you are greatly changed. I myself think that your face is still exactly the same—only you do not look at people in quite the same way. I have put it on the big mantelpiece and arranged my branch of palms all round it, so that when I enter the room it is the first thing I see.

My dear Jean, I have not yet ventured to wear that beautiful bracelet made by the negroes which you sent me, for fear of Olivette and Rose. They think already that I play at being a lady, and that would make it worse. When you are here and we are married, it will be different, and then I shall also wear Aunt Tounelle's beautiful necklace of little links, and her chain for scissors.

If only you would come! For you see I am wearying for the sight of you. I seem gay sometimes when I am with the others, but afterwards my sorrow grows heavier and heavier, and I hide myself and weep.

Good-bye, my dear Jean. I embrace you with all my heart.

JEANNE MÉRY.

VIII

Fatou's hands, the backs of which were deep black, had pink palms.

For a long time this discovery dismayed the spahi; he disliked seeing the palms of Fatou's hands, which in spite of himself made upon him an unpleasant impression like the cold paws of a monkey.

Nevertheless these hands were small and well-modelled, and joined to the rounded arm with a very delicate wrist.

But this discolouration of the palms; these parti-

coloured fingers had something not human about them, and inspired him with horror.

That and certain strange, falsetto intonations which escaped her sometimes when she was highly animatd, together with certain restless movements, recalled mysterious resemblances which troubled the imagination.

In the end, however, Jean had grown accustomed to these things, and no longer troubled his head about them. At times when Fatou seemed to him charming, and he was still in love with her, he would call her laughingly by a curious Yolof name, which signified "little monkey-girl."

Fatou herself was very much mortified by this pet name, and would assume staid airs and a serious expression which amused the spahi.

One day (it was exceptionally fine that day; the weather almost cool, the sky very clear)—one day Fritz Muller, who was going to pay Jean a visit, had noiselessly climbed the staircase and halted on the threshold.

There he was very much entertained by the following scene, which he witnessed from the door.

Jean, smiling the good-tempered smile of a child who is enjoying himself, appeared to be examining Fatou with great attention—stretching out her arms, turning her round, inspecting her from all points of view without uttering a word—and then suddenly, with an air of conviction, he thus expressed the conclusions at which he had arrived,

"You're exactly the same as a monkey."

And Fatou, deeply injured,

"Ah, Tjean! You not say that, my white man. First a monkey not knowing how to talk—and I knowing very well."

Thereupon Fritz Muller burst out laughing—and then Jean followed his example, especially when he saw the dignified, ceremonious manner that Fatou endeavoured to assume by way of protest against these uncomplimentary conclusions.

"In any case, a very pretty little monkey," said Muller, who had a great admiration for Fatou's good looks.

(He had lived a long time in the negro realm, and was a good judge of the pretty girls of the Soudan.)

"A very pretty little monkey! If all those in the woods of Galam were like her, one might grow accustomed to this accursed country, which assuredly has never been visited by the good God."

IX

A white hall, all open to the evening wind, two hanging lamps around which flutter large ephemerae dazzled by the flame; an uproarious company of men in red uniforms—coalblack kitchen wenches bustling around—a great supper party of spahis.

It has been a day of festivities—military festivities—a review at the barracks, races on desert-bred horses, camel races, races of oxen with riders, pirogue races—all the usual programme of a festal day in a little provincial town, with the addition of strange Nubian local colour.

All the fit men of the garrison, sailors, spahis,

riflemen, were to be seen parading the streets in uniform; mulattos, men and women in gala dress; the ancient Signard ladies of Senegal—the half-bred aristocracy, erect and dignified with their high headdresses of cotton foulard, and their two corkscrew curls in the mode of 1820—and the young Signard ladies in dresses of the fashion of to-day, yet in spite of this, odd, faded, suggestive, somehow of the coast of Africa. Besides these, there were two or three white women in dainty gowns, and behind them, as if to serve as a foil, a crowd of negroes, decked with grigris and barbaric ornaments—all Guet n'dar in holiday dress.

All the animation and life that St Louis could produce; all the population the old colony could muster in its dead-alive streets—all were out-of-doors for a single day—ready to return on the morrow to their listless existence in those silent houses, each in its coat of white limewash, like a corpse in a winding sheet.

And the spahis who have paraded by order all day long on the Place du Gouvernement are roused to a high state of excitement by this unusual stir.

This evening they are celebrating the award of promotions and decorations brought by the last mail from France; and Jean, who as a rule holds himself a little aloof, is present at this supper party, which is a regimental affair.

The black kitchen wenches are kept very busy waiting on the spahis, not because the spahis have eaten a great deal, but because they have had a prodigious quantity to drink, and are all intoxicated.

A great many toasts have been proposed; much conversation has passed, extravagantly simple, or extravagantly cynical—much wit has flashed—spahis' wit, smacking strongly of its origin, a medley of disillusionment and innocence. Many remarkable songs have been sung—appallingly suggestive, originating no one knows where, in Algiers, India, or some other spot—the solos comically discreet—the choruses terrible, and accompanied by the crashing of glasses and the thumping of fists enough to break down the tables. Old jokes have been made, ingenuous and well-worn, exciting bursts of youthful, joyous laughter, and words uttered capable of bringing a blush to the cheek of the devil himself.

Suddenly a spahi in the midst of this crazy uproar lifts his glass of champagne, and proposes this startling toast,

"To those who fell at Mecké and Bobdiarah."

A very strange toast this—not originating in the brain of the author of this story! Quite unforeseen this health that has been proposed! Is it a tribute to the memory of the dead, or a sacrilegious jest. He was very drunk the spahi who proposed this funereal toast, and there was gloom in his irresolute eyes.

. . . . . .

Alas! in a few years' time who will remember those who fell in the defeat at Bobdiarah and at Mecké, those whose bones lie blanched already on the sand of the desert?

The people of St Louis who saw them march away may remember their names. But in a few years'

time, who will be able to call them to mind and to say them again?

. . . . . .

So the glasses were drained to the memory of those who fell at Mecké and Bobdiarah. But this strange toast was followed by a moment of intense silence and astonishment, and it cast a gloomy veil upon the spahis' banquet.

Jean, especially—whose eyes had been sparkling with animation at the infectious gaiety of his comrades, and who, as it happened, had been laughing heartily all this evening, Jean relapsed again into his dreamy, serious mood, hardly knowing why.

"Fallen there in the desert!" . . .

Without grasping the full meaning of it, the idea of it chilled him, like the sound of a jackal's voice; it made his flesh creep. . . .

He was still very much of a child, poor Jean, not yet inured to war, not yet a seasoned soldier. Nevertheless he was very brave; he was not afraid, not in the least afraid, of fighting. When there was talk of Boubakar-Ségou, who was prowling with his army through Cayor, almost up to the gates of St Louis, he felt his heart leap. Sometimes he dreamt about it. It seemed to him that it would do him good, that it would rouse him to see shots fired at last, even it they were directed only against a negro chief. There were times when he was dying of impatience. . . .

It was solely with the idea of fighting that he had become a spahi—not in order that he might pass a

languid, monotonous existence in a little white house, held spell-bound by a Khassonké girl. . . .

Poor fellows, drinking to the memory of the dead, laugh, sing, be very merry and foolish, and snatch the fleeting moment of joy. . . . But song and uproar ring false in this land of Senegal, and yonder in the desert there are assuredly places already marked out for some of you.

X

"In Galam" . . . who can divine what mysterious echoes these words may awaken deep in the soul of an exiled negro?

The first time Jean has asked Fatou (this was long ago, in the house of his mistress),

"Where do you come from, child?"

Fatou had replied in a voice full of emotion,

"From the country of Galam" . . .

Poor negroes of the Soudan, dwelling in exile, driven forth from their native village by great wars, or great famines, those vast catastrophes that come upon these primitive countries—sold, carried away into slavery, they have sometimes traversed on foot, under the lash of their master, stretches of country more extensive than the whole of Europe. But the picture of their native land has remained graven ineffaceably in the depths of their black hearts. . . .

Sometimes it is far-away Timbuctoo or Ségou-Koro, with its great palaces of white clay mirrored in the waters of the Niger, or merely a humble village of straw, lost somewhere in the desert, or hidden

away in an obscure cranny of the mountains of the south, and left in the wake of the conqueror a heap of ashes and a charnel house for the vulture. . . .

"In Galam!" . . . the words are repeated musingly, mysteriously.

"Galam!" Fatou would say,

"Tjean, one day I shall take you to Galam with me." . . .

That ancient, sacred land of Galam, which Fatou had only to close her eyes to see again—the land of Galam, a country of gold and ivory, a country in whose tepid waters grey alligators lie asleep in the shade of tall mangrove trees, where the elephant roams through the deep forest, trampling heavily upon the soil in his rapid stride.

Once Jean used to dream of this land of Galam. Fatou had told him very remarkable tales about it, which had excited his imagination, sensitive to the fascination of new and unknown things. That was over now. His curiosity concerning all this land of Africa had abated and worn itself out. He preferred to continue his monotonous existence at St Louis, and to hold himself there in readiness for the blissful moment of his return to the Cevennes.

Besides, to go away over there to that country of Fatou's—so far from the sea—the one cool thing in Africa, the source of refreshing breezes, and above all, the means of communication with the rest of the world—to go away into that land of Galam, where the air must be hotter and heavier—to plunge into that stifling atmosphere of the interior—

No. He no longer desired it. At present he

would have refused, had a proposal been made to him to go and see what was happening in Galam. He dreamed of his own country, of its mountains and its cool rivers. The mere thought of Fatou's country made him feel hotter, and gave him a headache. . . .

XI

Fatou could never catch sight of a n'gabou (hippopotamus) without running the risk of falling down stone dead. This was a kind of spell cast upon her family by a sorcerer from the country of Galam, and all methods of breaking it had been tried in vain. There were numerous instances among her ancestry of persons who had thus fallen down stone dead at the mere sight of these great beasts, and this curse had pursued the family relentlessly for several generations.

For this is a kind of spell that is fairly common in the Soudan. Some families cannot endure the sight of a lion; others that of a sea-cow; others—these are the most unfortunate—that of an alligator. And it is an additional affliction that in these cases even amulets are of no avail.

One can imagine the precautions that Fatou's ancestors were obliged to take in the land of Galam —they had to refrain from country walks at times when the hippopotamuses chose to be abroad, and especially to keep away from the great grassy swamps where these monsters delighted to sport.

As for Fatou, when she heard that there was a young tame hippopotamus living in a house in St

Louis, she always went far out of her way to avoid passing through this quarter of the town, for fear of succumbing to a terrible, consuming curiosity to look upon the countenance of this beast, which she persuaded her friends to describe to her in minute detail each day—a curiosity which, as will be readily divined, was likewise connected with the spell.

XII

The time passed slowly in monotony and heat. All days were alike—the same routine of duty at the spahis' barracks; the same sun beating down on the white walls; the same all-pervading silence. There were rumours of war against Boubakar-Ségou, the son of El Hadj, which gave the men in red something to talk about, but went no further. Nothing ever happened in the dead-alive town; tidings of Europe came from afar, as if blurred by the heat.

Jean was passing through various moral phases; he had his moods of exaltation and of depression. As a rule he was conscious only of a vague sensation of boredom, a weariness of things in general; then, from time to time home-sickness, which seemed dormant in his heart, would overwhelm him again and make him unhappy.

The winter season drew near; the breakers off the coast were calmer, and there were already breathless days, when the surface of the warm sea lay smooth and shining like oil, reflecting in its vast mirror the strong, torrid light.

. . . . . .

Was Jean in love with Fatou-gaye?

He himself hardly knew, poor fellow.

He looked upon her, however, as an inferior being on the same level, perhaps, as his yellow dog. He did not trouble to try to fathom what there might be in the depths of that little black soul—a soul as black as its outer Khassonké covering.

She was deceitful and mendacious, little Fatou, with an incredible blend of malice and perversity; Jean had known this for a long time. But he was aware, too, of her absolute devotion to him, the devotion of a dog to its master, of a negro to his fetish, and without positively knowing to what height of heroism this sentiment might raise her, he was touched and softened by it.

Sometimes his intense pride was roused, and his white man's dignity rose in revolt. The faith he had plighted to his betrothed, and had betrayed for the sake of a little black girl, accused him to his honest conscience. He was ashamed of his weakness.

But Fatou-gaye had grown very handsome. When she walked with her lithe, well-moulded figure swaying from the hips with that grace of movement which the African women seem to have borrowed from the great felidæ of their country; when she passed by, with her drapery of white muslin floating like a peplum over her bosom and rounded shoulders, she had the perfection of an antique statue. When she lay asleep with her arms above her head, she displayed the curves of an amphora.

Under that high headdress of amber her delicate

face, with its regular features, had at times something of the beauty of an idol of polished ebony; her great, half-closed, lustrous, blue-black eyes, her dusky smile, slowly revealing her white teeth, all this had a negroid fascination, a sensual charm, a power of material seduction, an indefinable something which seemed to savour simultaneously of the monkey, the young virgin, and the tigress—and all this would race through the spahi's veins with a strange intoxication.

Jean had a kind of superstitious horror of all these amulets; at length there were moments when this profusion of *grigris* vexed and oppressed him. He had no faith in them, to be sure, but to see them everywhere, these negro amulets, to know that nearly all of them possessed the supposed virtue of holding and enmeshing him; to see them hanging from his ceiling and on his walls; to find them hidden under his mats and under his tara—charms everywhere, little objects, old and witchlike, with a malevolent air about them, and weird in shape—to wake up in the morning and feel them being stealthily slipped on to his breast—it seemed to him that in the end all this would weave in the air around him invisible, shadowy shackles.

And then he was short of money.

He said to himself very firmly that he would send Fatou away. He would make use of these last two years to win at last his gold stripes; he would send his old parents a small monthly remittance to make their life more comfortable; and he could still save sufficient money to bring back wedding presents to

Jeanne Méry, and to make a respectable contribution towards the expenses of their marriage feast.

But whether it was due to the power of the amulets, to force of habit, or the inertness of a will stupefied by the atmosphere, Fatou continued to hold him in the hollow of her little hand—and he did not drive her away.

He often thought of his betrothed. If he were to lose her he felt that his life would be ruined. The memory of her had a radiance. This "grown-up" girl, of whom his mother had told him, who "was prettier every day," wore for him an aureole. He tried to form an idea of her face, now that she had come to womanhood, imagining the development of the features of the fifteen-year-old child whom he had left. She was the centre of all his plans for future happiness. It was very precious, this possession of his that was waiting for him over there, very far away, in safe keeping at home.

The image of her, as she was in past days, had already become a little fainter; that of the future was still a little remote, and there were moments when he lost sight of her altogether.

And his old parents! How much he loved them too! For his father he felt a profound and filial love—a veneration which amounted almost to worship.

But perhaps it was his mother who still had the warmest place in his heart.

Take sailors and spahis—all those forlorn young men, who spend their lives far away on the wide ocean, or in the countries of exile, in the midst of

the roughest and most abnormal conditions of life. Take the worst of them; choose out the most reckless, the most unruly, the wildest, look into the deepest, most sacred corner of their heart. In that sanctuary you will often find an old mother enshrined —an old peasant from anywhere you please—a Basque in a woollen hood, or a good Breton housewife in a white cap.

. . . . . .

XIII

It is the beginning of Jean's fourth winter season.

Days of overpowering heat without a breath of air. The livid, leaden sky is mirrored in a sea as smooth as oil, where numerous families of sharks are disporting themselves. All along the coast of Africa the monotonous expanse of sand lies blindingly white under the reflection of the sun.

These are the days when the fish are engaged in mortal conflict. Suddenly, without visible cause, the smooth, polished surface of the sea is ruffled with wrinkles, spreading over an area of several hundreds of square yards. Bubbles and little whirling eddies appear. This disturbance is caused by a great shoal of panic-stricken fish, just below the surface of the water, fleeing with all the speed of their million fins before a school of ravenous sharks.

These days, too, are dear to the heart of the black pirogue men, the days they choose for long voyages and races.

On days such as these, when, to our European

constitutions, the air seems too heavy to breathe, when life ebbs away, and activity of any description is beyond our strength—on days such as these, if you happen to be lying asleep on a river-boat, in the shade of a moistened awning, you will often be wakened out of your unquiet midday sleep by the shouting and whistling of the rowers; by the noise of water rushing by under the feverish strokes of the paddle.

This is a company of pirogues, passing by, striving in fierce contest under a leaden sky.

And the negro population has roused itself from sleep, and is standing in crowds on the beach. The spectators encourage the competitors with loud clamour, and out there, as with us, the victors are received with clapping of hands, and the vanquished with shouts of derision.

XIV

Jean did not put in more time at the spahis' barracks than was required for the exact discharge of his duties, and often his comrades would take his place. His commanding officers shut their eyes to these arrangements, which permitted him to spend nearly the whole of his day in his private lodging.

He was now generally liked. The charm of his intelligence and integrity, the charm of his personal appearance, of his voice and bearing, gradually brought everyone under an influence which was unconsciously exercised. In the end, in spite of

everything Jean had won for himself confidence and esteem, and had attained a kind of privileged position, which allowed him almost complete liberty and independence. He knew how to perform the duties of a punctual, well-disciplined soldier, and at the same time to remain almost entirely his own master.

XV

One evening Jean returned to quarters when retreat was sounded.

The old barracks no longer wore their habitual air of dejection. Men were standing in groups in the courtyard, talking excitedly. Spahis were running up and downstairs four steps at a time, as if possessed with wild joy. It was obvious that there was something in the air—something new.

"Great news for you, Peyral," cried Muller the Alsatian, "you are off to-morrow, off to Algiers, lucky fellow."

Twelve new spahis had arrived from France by the steamer from Dakar; twelve of the senior spahis (of whom Jean was one) were to have the privilege of completing their term of service in Algiers.

To-morrow evening they were to leave for Dakar.

At Dakar they would embark on the French mail-boat for Bordeaux, thence they would proceed by the southern route to Marseilles, with halts on the way, affording those among them, who were possessed of hearth and home, an opportunity of dispersing and of paying them a visit. At Marseilles they would embark on the mailboat bound for Algiers

—a land of Cockayne for spahis, where the last years of their service would pass like a dream.

XVI

Jean returned home along the dreary banks of the river. The starry night descended upon Senegal, a night hot, heavy, amazing in its tranquillity and luminous transparency.

The current flowed with soft, whispering sounds. The tambour, the *anamalis fobil* of spring, which he was hearing in this same place for the fourth time, and which mingled with the memories of his first enervating pleasures in this dark country, came to him, faint, from a great distance. Now these sounds were to herald his departure. . . .

The slender crescent of the moon; the great stars, twinkling in a luminous haze, low on the level sky line; the fires alight on the opposite bank in the negro village of Sorr—all these cast upon the tepid water long trails of wavering light; heat dominated the atmosphere, brooded over the waters. There were gleams of phosphorescence everywhere, for all nature seemed impregnated with heat and phosphorescence. A mysterious calm hovered over the banks of the Senegal, a tranquil melancholy pervaded all things. . . .

The wonderful, unexpected news were true. Jean had made enquiries, his information was correct. His name was on the list of those who were to go; to-morrow evening he would sail down this river, never to return.

This evening no arrangements could be made connected with the departure; the offices at the barracks were closed; everyone was out. The preparations for the journey must be put off till to-morrow; this evening there was nothing to do but to dream, collect his thoughts, indulge in desultory reverie, and bid farewell to all that belonged to that land of exile.

His head was distracted with troubled thoughts, incoherent impressions.

In a month's time, perhaps, he would be paying a flying visit to his village, embracing, in passing, his dear old parents—seeing Jeanne, changed, grown-up and serious—and all this with the speed of a dream.

This was the main idea ever recurring from minute to minute, and each time administering a shock to his heart, so that it beat faster.

But he was unprepared for this meeting. There were all kinds of painful reflections mingling with this great, unlooked-for joy.

What impression would he make, returning after three years, without having gained even the modest stripes of sergeant; bringing home no presents after his long sojourn abroad; destitute as any vagabond; without a sou in his pocket; without even having had time to provide himself with a new outfit to enable him to make a respectable appearance in the village?

No. This departure was too sudden. The prospect elated and intoxicated him, but nevertheless he should have been allowed some days of preparation.

And then, Algiers, that unknown country, made no appeal to him. To have to go and acclimatise himself elsewhere!

Whatever happened, he would have to serve out far from home this term of years that had been carved out of his life. So why not complete it here, on the banks of this great, gloomy river, whose very melancholy was now familiar to him?

Alas! unhappy man, he loved his Senegal! Consciousness of this fact now dawned upon him; he was bound to it by a number of private and mysterious ties. Wild with joy at the thought of returning home, he yet clung to the country of sand, to Samba-Hamet's house, even to that atmosphere of infinitely dreary melancholy, even to that excess of heat and light.

He was not prepared for so sudden a departure.

. . . . . .

The influences of his environment have filtered little by little into the blood running through his veins; he feels himself restrained and held a prisoner by all kinds of invisible ties, shadowy fetters, amulets of dark significance.

In the end, the ideas in his troubled head grow confused; the unlooked-for deliverance fills him with apprehension.

In this hot, oppressive night, heavy with thunderous emanations, strange, mysterious influences contend around him; one might imagine the powers of sleep and death striving with those of dawn and life.

XVII

It is a sudden affair, this despatch of a draft of soldiers.

The next evening, with all his kit hurriedly put together, all his papers in order, Jean is leaning on his elbow against the railing of a ship sailing down the river. He smokes his cigarette, while he watches St Louis fading away in the distance.

Fatou-gaye is crouching on the deck by his side.

With all her *pagnes* and talismans hastily packed into four great calabashes, she was ready at the appointed time. Jean had to pay her passage to Dakar with the last *khâliss* of his pay.

He did this willingly, glad to humour this last fancy of hers, and to keep her with him a little longer.

The tears she shed, the "widow's complaints" she uttered, after the custom of her country, were sincere and heart-rending. Jean, touched to the heart by her despair, has forgotten that she is ill-natured, untruthful, and black.

The wider his heart expands with the joy of his home-coming the greater is the pity he feels for Fatou, a pity, moreover, not unmixed with tenderness.

At all events he is taking her to Dakar with him; it will give him time to think over the question of her disposal.

XVIII

Dakar is a kind of colonial town roughly constructed on a foundation of sand and red rock, an

improvised port of call for the mailboats bound for that western point of Africa called Cape Verde.

Great baobabs grow here and there on the desolate dunes; flights of fisheagles and vultures swoop through the air overhead.

Fatou-gaye is here provisionally installed in a mulatto hut. She declares that she will never return to St Louis. There her plans end. She does not know what is to become of her, and Jean is equally ignorant. He has racked his brains in vain, poor fellow, without hitting upon the vestige of a plan. And he has no more money! . . .

It is morning; the mailboat on which the spahis are to embark sails in a few hours. Fatou-gaye is crouching beside her four miserable calabashes, which represent her entire fortune, never uttering a word, not even in answer. Her eyes are fixed and immobile in a kind of dreary stupefaction of despair, a despair heart-rending in its sincerity and depth.

And Jean is standing beside her, twisting his moustache, not knowing what to do.

Suddenly the door is flung open noisily, and a tall spahi enters like the wind, in great excitement, with animation in his eyes, and an expression of agitation and anxiety.

This is Pierre Boyer, who has been Jean's comrade and room-mate at St Louis during the past two years. Both intensely reserved, they have seldom conversed, but they like each other, and when Boyer went away on service to Goree, they shook hands cordially.

Removing his cap, Pierre Boyer murmured a hasty

excuse for his wild intrusion, and then he seized Jean's hands and said effusively,

"Oh Peyral, I have been looking for you since before dawn. . . . Listen to me a moment. I want to talk to you. I have a great favour to ask. Listen first to what I have to say, and do not be in a hurry to reply. . . .

"You, lucky fellow, are going to Algiers. . . . I alas! together with several others from Goree am leaving to-morrow for the outpost of Gadiangué in Ouankarah. There is fighting in those parts. About three months to be spent there, and there's promotion to be won, no doubt, or else a medal.

"We have the same amount of service to put in; we are both of the same age. It would make no difference to your return. . . . Peyral, will you exchange with me?"

Jean had already understood; he had divined his purpose with the first words uttered. He gazed into vacancy with his eyes wide open, dilated as if with the torment he was inwardly enduring. A tumult of hesitating, contradictory thoughts surged in his head; with folded arms and bowed head he went on thinking—and Fatou, who had likewise grasped the situation, had straightened herself and sat with heaving breast, awaiting what verdict might fall from Jean's lips.

Then the other spahi continued, speaking volubly, as if to prevent Jean from uttering that word "No!" which he dreaded to hear.

"Listen, Peyral, it will be to your advantage, I assure you."

" What about the others, Boyer? . . . Did you ask them? "

" Yes, they refused. But I expected that. They, to be sure, have their reasons. It will be to your advantage, Peyral, you see. The Governor of Goree is interested in me, and he has promised you his protection, if you accept. We thought of you first " (with a look at Fatou), " because it is well known that you are fond of this country. On your return from Gadiangué, you would be sent to complete your service at St Louis ; that has been arranged with the Governor. I swear to you that it would be so."

. . . " In any case, we shall never have time," interrupted Jean, who felt that he was lost, and was clutching at a straw.

" Oh yes," . . . said Pierre Boyer, with a ray of joy already brightening his eyes. " We shall have plenty of time ; there is all the afternoon before us. You will have nothing to bother about. Everything has been arranged with the Governor ; the papers are ready. All that is required is your consent and your signature—and then I go back to Goree and return here in two hours' time, and everything will be settled. Listen, Peyral, here are my savings, three hundred francs ; they are yours. Perhaps the money may be useful to you when you return to St Louis and settle down, or on some other occasion. Do what you like with it."

" Oh, thank you," replied Jean. " I don't take money for this sort of thing." . . .

He turned away his head disdainfully, and Boyer,

aware that he had made a false step, took his hand and said,

"Don't be angry, Peyral."

And he held Jean's hand in his, and they both stood there, facing each other, troubled and silent.

Fatou, for her part, had realised that a word from her might ruin all. She had merely thrown herself on her knees again, softly muttering a negro prayer, and had wound her arms around the spahi's legs, clinging to him.

Jean, vexed that another man should witness such a scene, said to her roughly,

"Come, Fatou, let me go, I beg you. Have you suddenly gone crazy?"

But to Pierre Boyer the pair did not seem ridiculous. On the contrary, he thought the scene touching.

A ray of morning sunshine glided across the yellow sand and slid in through the open door, casting a red light on the spahis' uniforms, illuminating their pleasant, vigorous faces, clouded with anxiety and indecision, making the silver bracelets flash on Fatou's supple arms, wound snake-like around Jean's knees; emphasizing the dreary bareness of this African hut of wood and thatch where these three forlorn young creatures were deciding their own fate. . . .

"Peyral," continued the other spahi, speaking low, in a gentle voice.

"You see, Peyral, I am an Algerian. You know what that means. My good old parents live at Blidah, and they are waiting for me. They have no

one but me. You, Peyral, will understand what it means to return to one's home."

. . . . . .

"Very well, then, yes!" said Jean, pushing his red cap to the back of his head, and stamping on the ground, "Yes! I agree. I will exchange with you and stay."

. . . . . .

The spahi Boyer clasped him in his arms and embraced him. Fatou, still grovelling on the ground, uttered a cry of triumph, then hid her face against Jean's knees, with a kind of wild animal's roar, ending in a burst of hysterical laughter, followed by sobs.

. . . . . .

XIX

Time was short. Pierre Boyer departed with the same mad haste with which he had come, carrying with him to Goree the precious document to which poor Jean had affixed a true soldier's signature, large, correct, and legible.

When the last moment arrived, all the papers were in order, countersigned and initialled, the baggage had been transhipped, and the exchange effected. Th whole affair had been patched up in such haste that the two spahis had scarcely had time to think.

At three o'clock precisely the mail boat sailed with Pierre Boyer on board.

And Jean remained behind.

XX

But when the thing was done and past recall, when Jean found himself standing there on the seashore watching the ship's departure, a frantic despair seized his heart—a terrible agony, mingled with terror at this thing that he had done; rage against Fatou, a horror of the black girl's proximity, and a need, as it were, of chasing her from him—together with a newly kindled, immense, and profound love for his cherished home, and the dear ones who were waiting for him there, and whom now he was not to see. . . .

It seemed to him that he had signed a compact to the death with this sombre land, and that this was the end of him.

And he rushed away across the dunes, hardly conscious of where he was going—urged on by a longing to breathe the air, to be alone, and especially to follow with his eyes as long as possible this ship that was speeding away. . . .

. . . . . .

When he set out, the sun was still high and scorchingly hot; in the full light, these desert plains had an impressive majesty. He walked for a long time by the desolate shore, over the ridge of the sandhills, or along the top of the red cliffs, so that he might command a more distant view. A high wind blew upon him, and ruffled the immense stretch of sea that lay at his feet, and still he saw the ship speeding onwards.

He was so distraught that he no longer felt the sun burning him.

Riveted for two more years to this country, when at this very moment he might have been on yonder ship, sailing over the sea, on his way to his beloved village. . . .

Good God! What were these sinister influences, spells, and amulets that had held him back?

Two years! Would the time ever be fulfilled? Would there indeed be an end of it, a deliverance from this exile? . . .

And he ran towards the north in the direction the ship had taken, that he might not lose sight of her yet. Thorny plants tore him; a swarm of large, wild crickets, disturbed among the grasses that flourish in the winter season, flew against his breast like hail. . . .

He was very far away, alone in the midst of that austere landscape, the silent and melancholy region of Cape Verde. For a long time he had seen ahead of him a great solitary tree, larger even than the baobabs, with dense, dark foliage, a tree so huge that it might have been taken for one of those giants of the flora of the ancient world, remaining there forgotten through the centuries.

Exhausted, he sat down on the sand under the dome-like shade, with bowed head, and burst into tears.

When he rose to his feet, the ship had disappeared, and it was evening.

At evening the mournful country grew stiller and colder. In the twilight the great tree appeared as a

mass of absolute blackness, rearing itself aloft in the midst of the vast African solitude.

Before him in the distance lay the pacified sea, infinitely calm; beneath him, at his feet, the cliffs descending in terraces to the great Cape Verde; flat stretches of land, intersected by straight ravines bare of vegetation—a wide landscape of a heart-rending dreariness of aspect.

Behind him, on the side verging upon the interior, rose mysterious ridges of low hills, stretching away out of sight, and distant outlines of baobabs, resembling silhouettes of madrepores.

Not a breath of air disturbs the dense atmosphere; the sun, already obscured, sinks down among heavy vapours, its yellow disk strangely magnified and distorted by the mirage. . . . All over the sand the daturas open their great white calyces to the influence of evening; the air is heavy with their unwholesome perfume and charged with the maleficent scent of belladonna. Moths flutter about the poisonous flowers. Everywhere among the tall grasses is heard the plaintive call of the turtle doves. This whole land of Africa is shrouded in a deadly vapour, and already the horizon is vague and sombre.

Yonder, behind him, lies that mysterious interior of the land, which once inspired his dreams, . . . but now, between this and Podor or Medina or the country of Galam or mysterious Timbuctoo, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that he would care to see.

He knows, or can imagine, all the melancholy, all the suffocating heat of this land. His thoughts

are elsewhere now—in a word, this whole country fills him with dread.

His one desire is to break away from all these nightmares, to depart, to go hence at all costs.

. . . . . .

Tall, wild-looking African shepherds pass by, driving before them to the village their lean herds of hump-backed cattle.

That simulacrum of the sun, which the Bible would have called "a sign in the heavens," fades slowly like a pale meteor. Night is here. . . . All things are veiled in unhealthy vapour, and the silence grows intense. . . . Beneath the great tree it is still and dark as in a temple.

And Jean dreams of his cottage, with the aspect it wears at this hour on summer evenings; of his old mother and his betrothed. And it seems to him that all is over; he dreams that he is dead, and that he will never see them again.

. . . . . .

XXI

The die was cast, and he must go where he was sent. Two days later Jean embarked, in his friend's stead, on a small warship for the distant outpost of Gadiangué in the Ouankarah. Some troops and munitions were being sent to reinforce that forlorn outpost. The surrounding country was disturbed. Caravans no longer passed by; there were conflicting negro interests, strife between rapacious tribes and

predatory chiefs. It was thought that this state of affairs would come to an end with the winter season, and when the force returned in two or three months' time, Jean would be sent back to St Louis, there to complete his service, as the Governor of Goree had promised the spahi Boyer.

The little vessel was overcrowded. First of all, there was Fatou, who had succeeded in securing a passage by dint of importunity and subterfuge, claiming to be the wife of a black rifleman. She was there in the capacity of follower, with her four calabashes and all her possessions.

There were about ten spahis from the garrison of Goree, who were being sent into the exile of camp for a season; besides these, some twenty native riflemen, dragging their entire families along with them.

These native troops brought with them a remarkable equipage—several wives and children to each man, millet in calabashes for food, and in addition, clothing, household utensils—all packed in calabashes—with amulets in heaps and domestic animals in herds.

At the time of departure the deck was a scene of violent commotion and confusion. At first sight it seemed as if this medley of people and things would never be reduced to order.

Not so, however. After they had been an hour under way, the kit was piled up in miraculous order, and all was still. The negresses who were on board lay asleep on deck, rolled in their *pagnes*, packed as tightly and lying as quietly as fish in a tin, and the

ship glided smoothly towards the south, cleaving its way steadily towards regions of ever intenser heat and ever bluer skies.

XXII

A night of intense calm on the equatorial sea. In the midst of absolute stillness, the lightest rustlings of the sails are audible—from time to time a negress, sleeping on deck, utters a groan; the vibrations of the human voice are startlingly loud.

All things lie in a tepid stupor. The atmosphere is sluggish with the dull torpor of a slumbering world.

The milky, phosphorescent sea reflects in its vast mirror the hot transparent night. One might fancy oneself between two mirrors, opposite one to the other, eternally reflecting each other, or imagine oneself suspended in vacancy, for no longer is there a distinguishable horizon.

In the distance the two planes are merged in one. Sky and water, both are blended in cosmic, vague, infinite depths.

And the moon is very low in the sky, a great disk of red, rayless fire, hanging in the midst of a world of pale, flax-coloured, phosphorescent vapours.

In the earliest geological ages, before day was divided from night, the universe must have been permeated with this same expectant calm. The pauses between the acts of creation must have been fraught with this same indescribable immobility in those epochs when the worlds were yet nebulous, when

light was still diffused and vague, when the brooding clouds were vapourous lead and iron, when infinite and eternal matter was sublimated by the intense heat of aboriginal chaos.

. . . . . .

XXIII

The voyage has lasted three days.

At sunrise the whole world is bathed in a dazzling golden light.

And on this fourth day the rising sun reveals in the east a long line of green—which is at first likewise tinged with gold, changing to a shade so unnaturally vivid that one might compare it to the precise and delicate colouring on a Chinese fan.

This line is the coast of Guinea.

The troopship has arrived at the Diakhallémé outlet, and is approaching the wide entrance to the river.

The land there is as flat as Senegal, but its natural characteristics are different. With it begins a region where the leaves never fall.

The whole country is covered with wonderful verdure, a verdure already equatorial, a verdure that never dies—an emerald green whose vividness is never matched by that of our own trees, even in the radiant month of June.

Further than the eye can see there is nothing but this one interminable forest, of an unvarying flatness, mirrored in the warm, stagnant water, an unhealthy forest whose damp soil teems with reptiles.

XXIV

In this country, too, there was a melancholy stillness, yet it was restful to eyes accustomed to those desert sands.

At the village of Poupoubal on the Diakhallémé the vessel halted, unable to sail further up the river.

The passengers disembarked and waited for the canoes or pirogues which were to convey them to their destination.

XXV

At nine o'clock one night in July, Fatou and the spahis from Goree took their places in a canoe manned by ten black rowers, under the orders of Samba-Boubou, a skilful skipper, a pilot with experience of the rivers of Guinea. They were bound for the outpost of Gadiangué, which was situated several leagues higher up the river.

It was a night without a moon, but cloudless, hot, and starry—a night characteristic of the equator.

They glided up the calm river with surprising speed, borne towards the interior on the swift current, aided by the indefatigable efforts of the rowers.

In the darkness both banks slid past mysteriously; the trees, massed together in the gloom, flitted away like great shadows. Forest after forest sped by.

Samba-Boubou led the chorus of the rowers; his mournful, shrill voice would pitch upon a wild, high note, then trail plaintively down to the depths of the

base, and the choir would take up the burden in slow, solemn tones; during the long hours the same strange phrase was repeated again and again, with the same response from the rowers. For a long time they sang the praises of the spahis, their horses, even their dogs; then of the warriors of the family of Soumaré, and then of Saboutané, a legendary woman of the banks of the Gambia.

And when the regular movement of the oars flagged under the influence of weariness or sleep, Samba-Boubou made a hissing sound between his teeth, and this snake-like noise, repeated by all the rowers, rekindled their ardour as if by magic.

Thus they glided at dead of night through the whole length of the sacred wood of the Mandinga religion, and overhead the ancient trees stretched out their massive grey branches, angular shapes like structures of gigantic bones, rigid as stone, their outlines vaguely revealed in the diffused starlight, until they passed out of sight.

Mingled with the singing of the negroes and the sound of the flowing water were the weird voices of monkeys screaming in the woods, or the shrieks of birds of the swamp; all the calls, all the mournful cries that are heard at night in the echoing forests. There were human cries, too, sometimes—death cries heard from afar, fusillades and the muffled sounds of the war tom-toms. Here and there, when the canoe passed by the outskirts of some African village, the glare of great incendiary fires could be seen in the sky. War was already being waged through all this region. Sarakholes against Landou-

mans; Nalous against Toubacayes; and right and left villages were going up in flames.

And then, league after league, all was still again with the silence of night and the deep forests. And ever the same monotonous singing, the same sound of the oars cleaving the dark waters; the same fantastic voyage as through a land of shadows; the river bearing them ever onwards on its swift current; silhouettes of tall palm trees ever gliding past overhead; forest ever succeeding forest.

The speed at which they travelled seemed to increase from hour to hour. The river had dwindled surprisingly; it was now a mere stream, flowing through the woods, and carrying them deeper into the interior. The night was profound.

The negroes' songs of praise continued. Samba-Boubou still uttered his weird head note, with which mingled the shrieks of monkeys, and the chorus still made its sombre response. They sang as if in a kind of dream, and they rowed furiously, with superhuman strength, as if galvanised, in a feverish anxiety to reach their goal.

. . . . . .

At last they come to a place where the river flows between deep banks formed by two chains of wooded hills. Lights appear high up on a great rock which stands out in front of them; the lights seem to be moving hastily down to the banks. Samba-Boubou kindles a torch and utters a rallying cry. The garrison of Gadiangué are here to greet them. They have reached their destination.

Gadiangué is perched there on the summit of this perpendicular rock, and is reached by steep paths, where negroes show them the way with torches. A large hut has been made ready for the spahis, and they lie down on mats to sleep until morning, which is not far off.

XXVI

The first to awake after barely an hour's sleep, Jean opens his eyes and sees the white light of dawn filtering between the planks of the hut, shining upon the young men, who are lying half-naked on the ground, their heads pillowed on their red jackets—Bretons, Alsatians, Picards—almost all of them fair-haired men from the north. In this moment of waking, Jean had a kind of prophetic vision, a mournful, mysterious, comprehensive foreknowledge of the destiny of all these exiles, their lives menaced by an ever-lurking death and recklessly cast away.

Close to him lay a graceful feminine form with two black, silver-braceletted arms curving towards him as if to embrace him.

Then, little by little, he remembered that he had arrived the previous night at a village in Guinea, lost in the midst of vast savage regions, that he was farther than ever from home, in a place where even letters would not reach him.

Quietly, so that he might not disturb Fatou and the still sleeping spahis, he approached the open window and gazed out at this new country.

He was overlooking a precipice some three hundred

feet deep. This hut that he was in seemed suspended in the air above it. At his feet lay a landscape with the characteristic features of the interior, as yet but vaguely revealed in the pale light of dawn.

There were steep hills, covered with masses of verdure, such as he had never seen before.

Below, right at the foot of the precipice, flowed the river which had brought him thither, a long, silver ribbon upon the mud, partly veiled by a white cloud of morning mist. The crocodiles that lay on the banks looked like small lizards, seen from such a height. The air was filled with an unknown scent.

The exhausted rowers were sleeping down there, where they had halted the previous night, lying in their canoe upon their oars.

XXVII

There was a clear stream flowing over a bed of dark pebbles, between walls of wet, polished rock. Trees formed an arch above it; the landscape had a freshness that one might have associated with any other place rather than an obscure corner in the heart of Africa.

Naked women, of the same reddish-brown colouring as the rocks, their heads ornamented with amber, were everywhere washing *pagnes*, and excitedly recounting the events and combats of the night. Warriors armed to the teeth were fording the stream on their way to battle.

. . . . . .

Jean took his first walk around the village, whither his new fate had brought him for an indefinite period.

There was certainly trouble brewing, and the little post of Gadiangué foresaw a time when it would be obliged to close its doors to allow the negro communities time to settle their own affairs—as one closes one's windows during a passing shower.

But in all this there was movement, vitality, originality even to excess. There were forests, verdure, flowers, mountains, running water—awe-inspiring, natural splendour.

There was no element of gloom in it, and it was all new and strange.

From the distance comes the sound of the tom-tom, the warlike music draws nearer, until it is close at hand and deafeningly loud. The women at their washing by the clear stream, and Jean himself, raise their heads and look up into the blue space framed in polished rock. An allied chief is passing by overhead with his fighting men, scrambling with monkey-like agility over the trunks of fallen trees. He proceeds on his way with pomp, with music heading the procession. . . . The arms and amulets of the warriors in his train glitter in the sun, as they file past with swift, light step, in the overwhelming heat.

It is almost noon when Jean climbs back along the green paths to the village.

The huts of Gadiangué are grouped together in the shade of great trees. They are of a good height, and have almost a certain elegance, with their high

pitched roofs of thatch. Women are sleeping on mats on the ground; others, seated on the verandahs, are soothing small children with long-drawn lullabies. And warriors, armed to the teeth, recount to one another their exploits of the previous night as they wipe their big iron knives.

. . . . . .

No. Certainly, there is no element of melancholy in all this. The intensely hot air is terribly heavy, but it has not the overwhelmingly depressing quality of the air on the banks of the Senegal, and the vital, equatorial sap circulates through everything.

Jean looks around him and feels alive. He is not sorry now to have come. He has never imagined anything to equal this.

Later, when he has returned to his home, he will be glad that he has set foot in this distant region, and he will look back on it with pleasure.

He regards this sojourn in the Ouankarah as a spell of freedom spent in a wonderful hunting country, clad with verdure and forests. It seems to him a period of respite from the terribly monotonous existence, the deadly routine of life in exile.

XXVIII

Jean had a poor old silver watch by which he set as much store as Fatou by her amulets—it was his father's watch, which the latter had given to him at the moment of parting. This, and a medal, which he wore on a chain round his neck, were his most cherished possessions.

The medal bore the Virgin's effigy. Once when he was ill his mother had laid it on his breast, and though he was then but a tiny child, he remembered the day when it had been placed there, and it had never been removed. He was lying in his first little cot, suffering from some childish ailment, the only one that had ever attacked him. He had woken up and had seen his mother weeping by his side; it was a winter afternoon; through the window the snow was visible, covering the mountain like a white cloak. Gently raising his little head, his mother had hung the medal round his neck. Then she had kissed him, and he had gone to sleep again.

That was more than fifteen years ago. Since then the dimensions of his neck and throat had increased greatly, but the medal remained in its place. He had never suffered so acute a pang as one night, the first he had ever spent in a place of ill-fame, when the hands of some girl had chanced upon the sacred medal, and the miserable creature had burst out laughing as she touched it. . . .

As for the watch, it was some forty years since it had been bought, secondhand, by his father, with his first savings out of his soldier's pay. Once upon a time, apparently, it had been a very remarkable watch, but now it was somewhat old-fashioned, large and cumbrous, and it struck the hour in a way that proclaimed its very venerable age.

His father still valued it highly. (Watches were not very common possessions among the mountaineers in his village.)

The watchmaker in a neighbouring market town,

who had repaired it before Jean went away on service, had pronounced its works to be uncommonly good, and his old father had entrusted this companion of his youth to his care with all kinds of recommendations.

At first Jean had worn it, but with the regiment, whenever he looked at the time, he heard bursts of laughter. The jokes made on the subject of this "turnip" were so uncalled for that once or twice Jean had turned quite red with rage and pain.

Rather than hear this watch disparaged he would have suffered all kinds of insults to himself, and he would have welcomed blows in the face that he could have repaid in kind. It pained him all the more, because privately he was obliged to admit to himself that there was something a little ridiculous about this poor, dear old watch. His affection for it increased; it caused him inexpressible pain to see it thus held up to derision, especially as he realised its oddity himself.

Then he ceased to wear it, to save it from these insults. He did not even wind it, so as to give its works a rest, especially as the jolting it had suffered on the voyage, and the great unaccustomed heat, had caused it to indicate the most unlikely hours—in fact to go entirely off the lines.

He had put it away tenderly in a box, where he kept his most cherished possessions, his letters, his little souvenirs of home. This box was a fetish box; one of those absolutely sacred boxes such as sailors always possess, and soldiers now and then.

Fatou had been formally forbidden to touch it.

Nevertheless, this watch attracted her. She had discovered how to open the precious box. When Jean was away, she had found out by herself how to wind up the watch, how to move the hands and make it strike. When she put it close to her ear she would listen to the little cracked tones, with the inquisitive air of an ouistiti which has found a musical box.

XXIX

At Gadiangué one never experienced a sensation of coolness or physical well-being. Not even the nights were fresh, as in the winter season in Senegal.

From morning onwards, the same oppressive, deadly heat prevailed in the shade of that wonderful verdure. From morning onwards, before sunrise, at whatever hour, in whatever place, always, always, the same temperature, the temperature of a vapour bath, moist, overpowering, poisonous, pervading these forests, the abode of chattering monkeys, green parrots, and rare humming birds; these shady paths, these tall dank grasses, where serpents glided. All the heat and heaviness of the equatorial atmosphere was concentrated during the night under the foliage of the great trees; and everywhere the air was steeped in deadly miasma.

As had been foreseen, at the end of three months, the country was quiet. The war, the negro massacres were over. The caravans resumed their journeys, bringing to Gadiangué from the depths of Africa gold, ivory, feathers, all the products of the Soudan and the interior of Guinea.

And the order having been given to withdraw the reinforcements, a ship was sent to wait for the spahis at the mouth of the river to bring them back to Senegal.

Alas, poor fellows! not all of them had survived. Out of twelve that had fared forth, two failed to obey the order of recall; two lay asleep in the hot earth of Gadiangué, victims of fever.

But Jean's hour had not yet come, and one day he set out on his return journey along the route that he had taken three months before in Samba-Boubou's canoe.

XXX

This time it was high noon; the spahis were journeying in a Mandinga pirogue, shaded by a moistened awning.

They kept close to the dense verdure of the banks, gliding beneath branches and hanging roots of trees for the sake of the scanty shade, warm and danger-haunted, which these cast upon the river.

The water seemed stagnant and motionless, heavy as oil, with wisps of fever-impregnated vapour hovering here and there above its polished surface.

The sun was at its zenith; it darted down its perpendicular light from a sky of violet grey, leaden grey, dim with the miasma of the swamps.

The heat was so appalling that the black oarsmen, in spite of all their pluck, were obliged to take a rest. The tepid water could no longer quench their thirst; they were exhausted, and seemed to be melting away in perspiration.

And then, when they halted, the pirogue, carried gently along by an almost imperceptible current, drifted onwards. The spahis could study at close quarters a whole strange world, the underworld that had its being beneath the mangroves and peopled all the marshes of equatorial Africa.

In the shade, in the obscure network of great roots, this world lay asleep.

There, two steps away from the canoe, which glided past without a sound, stealing by so quietly that not even the birds were awakened—near enough to touch it—lay dull-green crocodiles, their sleek forms stretched out on the mud, yawning and grinning idiotically with gaping viscous jaws. There were graceful white herons asleep likewise, snowy white balls, standing on one leg, and to avoid contact with the mud actually perched on the backs of the crocodiles in their trance-like sleep. There were kingfishers of every shade of green and blue taking their noonday rest by the water's edge, in the company of sluggish lizards and great, wonderful butterflies that had come to life in a temperature like a boiler's, slowly folding and unfolding their wings wherever they happened to alight, resembling dead leaves when their wings were closd, brilliant as mysterious jewels when their wings were spread, all glittering with blue enamel and metallic gleams.

Above all, there were roots of mangrove trees, roots and still more roots, trailing down everywhere, like sheaves of filaments; roots of all lengths and thicknesses, falling in tangled masses from every direction. You would have said thousands of nerves,

tentacles, grey arms, eager to enmesh and envelop all things. Great stretches of country were covered with these entanglements of roots. And swarming all over the mud and the roots and the crocodiles were colonies of great grey crabs, continually brandishing their single pair of ivory white pincers, as if seeking in dreams to clutch an imaginary prey. The somnambulistic movement of all these crabs under the dense verdure was the only sign of life perceptible throughout this sleeping universe.

. . . . . .

When the black oarsmen had recovered their breath, they resumed, in low voices, their wild singing, and rowed furiously. Then the spahis' pirogue cut through the quiet waters of the Diakhallémé and sped down the winding river, gliding very swiftly through the heart of the forests.

As the canoe approached the sea, the hills and the great trees that had characterised the interior disappeared. Once more they were in the midst of the vast plain, with its inextricable tangle of mangroves covering it like a mantle of uniform green.

. . . . . .

The overpowering heat of noon was past, and some birds were flying about. Nonetheless a perpetual stillness possessed this region; beyond the reach of sight there was the same monotony, the same trees, the same calm.

There was nothing to be seen but a never varying border of mangroves, recalling from a distance the familiar aspect of poplars by our riversides in France. To right and left, at intervals, there opened out new

watercourses where the same silence brooded, watercourses which vanished from sight in the remote distance, ever bordered by these same curtains of perpetual verdure. All Samba-Boubou's wide experience was needed to pilot the pirogue through the labyrinth of these creeks.

No sound, no movement was perceptible, except, now and then, the tremendous plunge of a hippopotamus, who, disturbed by the measured cadences of the oarsmen, disappeared, leaving great swirling eddies on the mirror of the warm clouded waters.

For this reason Fatou, lying for greater safety in the very bottom of the canoe, with a double screen of leaves and wet cloths over her head, kept her eyes tightly closed. This she did, because she had made enquiries and knew what denizens one might expect to see on these river banks.

When she arrived at Poupoubal, she had accomplished the whole journey without having dared to cast a single glance about her all the way. To induce her to stir, Jean had to assure her very positively that they had reached their destination, and that, moreover, it was black night, and the danger, therefore, at an end. She lay, quite benumbed, in the bottom of the pirogue, and replied in the querulous voice of a coaxing child. She wanted Jean to take her in his arms and carry her himself on board the ship from Goree, and this he did.

These wiles were generally successful with the poor spahi, who would yield at times and spoil Fatou, simply because he felt the need of someone to pet,

someone to cherish, and Fatou was better than nothing.

XXXI

The Governor of Goree did not forget his promise to the spahi Boyer; on his return Jean was posted again to St Louis, there to complete his term of exile.

Jean was conscious of a certain emotion as the country of sand and the white town came into sight; he had an affection for them, such as one always feels for places where one has lived and endured a long time. And then, in the first moments, he took a kind of pleasure in revisiting what was almost a town, almost civilisation, and resuming former habits and friendships. It was only by virtue of his prolonged deprivation of all these things that they acquired the slightest importance in his eyes on his return to them.

There is small demand for lodgings in Senegal. Samba-Hamet's house had no new occupants. Coura n'diaye witnessed the return of Jean and Fatou, and opened the door of their former dwelling to them.

For the spahi, the days relapsed again into their former monotonous routine.

XXXII

Nothing had changed in St Louis. In their quarter the same tranquillity prevailed. The tame marabouts that lived on their roof clacked their beaks, as

they sunned themselves, with the same sound of dry wood, such as is made by the cogged wheels of a windmill.

The negresses still pounded their everlasting kouss-kouss. Everywhere the same familiar sounds, the same monotonous stillness, the same calm of prostrate nature.

But Jean was growing more and more weary of it all.

Day by day he drew further away from Fatou; he was utterly out of conceit with his black mistress.

She had grown more exacting and also more malicious, more especially since she had realised her power over Jean—ever since he had stayed behind on her account.

Scenes were frequent between them. At times she would exasperate him from sheer perversity and spitefulness.

Latterly he had acquired a habit of striking her with his riding whip, not very hard at first, but as time went on with increasing violence. His blows sometimes left marks like parallel scorings on Fatou's bare back—black on black. Afterwards he would be sorry and ashamed.

One day, as he was returning to his dwelling, he had seen from a distance a Khassonké, a big, black gorilla of a man, beating a hasty retreat through the window.

On this occasion he did not so much as say one word. After all, he was indifferent to anything that she might do.

He had come to the end of any sentiment of pity, or tenderness even, that at moments he might have felt. He had had enough of her; he was tired of her; disgusted with her. He kept her, simply because he was too lazy to get rid of her.

He had entered upon his last year; everything pointed to the end, to his departure. He began to count the months.

Sleep had abandoned him, a common sequence to a long sojourn in these enervating countries. At night he would spend hours leaning on his elbow at the window, breathing in with rapture the cool air of his last winter season—and above all, dreaming of his return.

The moon, in her quiet course over this desert land, generally found him there at his window. He loved these beautiful, tropic nights, the rosy glow upon the sand; the trails of silver on the gloomy waters of the river. Each night the wind wafted to him from the plains of Sorr the distant cry of the jackals—and even this doleful cry had come to be a familiar sound.

When he reflected that soon he would be leaving all this for ever, the thought seemed to cast a vague gloom upon the joy of his return.

XXXIII

It was several days since Jean had opened his box of treasures and looked at his old watch.

He was on duty in barracks, when he suddenly thought of it with a feeling of uneasiness.

He returned home, walking more rapidly than was his wont, and on his arrival he opened his box.

His heart felt a sudden shock. The watch was nowhere to be seen. . . . In feverish anxiety he ransacked the contents of the box. . . . No, it was no longer there! . . .

Fatou was humming a tune with an air of indifference, watching him all the time out of the corner of her eye. She was threading beads; arranging colour effects for her necklaces; busy with great preparations for the next day's festivals, the bamboulas of Tabaski, at which one had to look one's best.

"You have put it somewhere else? Quick, Fatou, tell me. . . . I had forbidden you to touch it. Where have you put it? . . ."

"*Ram!*" . . . (I don't know), answered Fatou unconcernedly.

A cold sweat broke out on Jean's forehead, distracted as he was with anxiety and rage. He took Fatou by the arm and shook her roughly.

"Where have you put it? . . . Come, tell me at once."

"*Ram!*"

Suddenly a light dawned upon him. He had caught sight of a new *pagne*, with a pink and blue zig-zag pattern, carefully folded, hidden away in a corner in readiness for the next day's festivities. . . .

He understood. Snatching up the *pagne* he unfolded it and flung it on the ground.

"You have sold the watch," he cried. "Come, Fatou, be quick, tell me the truth." . . .

He threw her on her knees on the floor in a furious rage and seized his whip.

Fatou knew perfectly well that she had touched a precious fetish, and that it was a serious matter. But she possessed the audacity that comes of impunity. She had already offended so many times, and Jean had so many times forgiven her.

Yet she had never before seen Jean like this; she uttered a cry; she was afraid. She began to kiss his feet.

"Pardon, Tjean! . . . Pardon!"

. . . . . .

In such moments of fury Jean did not realise his own strength. He was subject to these fits of almost savage passion common to children who have grown up in the woods. He rained blows upon Fatou's bare back, inflicting stripes from which the blood gushed, and with the falling of the blows his rage increased.

At length he grew ashamed of what he had done, and throwing down the whip he cast himself on his couch. . . .

XXXIV

A moment later Jean was running towards the market of Guet n'dar.

In the end Fatou had confessed, and had told him the name of the merchant to whom she had sold the watch. He had some hope of finding his poor old watch still there, and of being able to buy it back; he had just drawn his monthly pay, and this sum of

money should be sufficient for the purpose.

He walked very rapidly; he ran; he hastened to reach the market, as if, while he was actually on his way, some black purchaser were standing there bargaining for the watch, and on the point of carrying it off.

. . . . . .

On the sands at Guet n'dar tumult prevails. A confused throng, composed of every type of negro, is gathered together, uttering a babel of all the languages of the Soudan. There, throughout the year, is held a great market, crowded with people from all parts of Africa, and every imaginable article is offered for sale—precious things, absurd things, merchandise useful and fantastic, the most incongruous wares, gold and butter, meat and unguents, live sheep and manuscripts, prisoners and porridge, amulets and vegetables.

One side of the picture is framed by an arm of the river, St Louis in the background, with its straight lines, its Babylonian terraces, its white limewash splashed with brick red, and here and there the yellow crest of a palm tree, erect against the blue sky.

On the other side lies Guet n'dar, the negro ant heaps, with its thousands of pointed roofs.

Close by caravans are halting, camels lying on the sand, Moors unloading their bales of ground nuts and their fetish pouches of wrought leather.

Pedlars of both sexes are crouched on the sand, laughing and quarrelling, jostled and trodden upon, they and their wares, by their customers.

"*Hou! dièndé m'pât!*" . . . (women selling sour milk out of goatskins sewn together, with the hair on the inner side).

"*Hou! dièndé nébam!*" (butter sellers—women of the Peuhle tribe, with great, three-cornered chignons, ornamented with copper discs—diving with both hands for their merchandise into vessels of hairy goatskin—rolling it between their fingers into little grimy balls, sold at a halfpenny each—then wiping their paws on their hair).

"*Hou! dièndé kheul! . . . dièndé khorompolé*" (women selling simples, little bundles of enchanted herbs, lizard tails, and roots with magic properties).

"*Hou! dièndé tchiakhkha! . . . dièndé djiareb!*" . . . (women squatting on the ground selling grains of gold, fragments of jade, amber beads, silver frontlets—all spread out on the ground on pieces of dingy linen and trodden upon by the customers).

"*Hou! dièndé guerté! . . . dièndé khankhel! dièndé jap-nior* . . . (women selling pistachios, live ducks, absurd eatables, meat dried in the sun, sweet pastes, devoured by flies).

Women selling salt fish, pipes, things of every description; old jewels; old dirty verminous pagnes robbed from the corpse; Galam butter, used for frizzling the hair; little old tails of hair, cut or torn from the heads of dead negresses, and plaited and gummed ready for use just as they are.

Women selling grigris, amulets, old guns, gazelles' dung, old copies of the Koran, annotated by pious Marabouts of the desert; musk, flutes, old silver-handled daggers, old iron knives that have already

been plunged into men's vitals; tom-toms, giraffes' horns, and old guitars.

Beggars and vagabonds, the dregs of negro humanity, sit about under the gaunt, yellow cocoanut palms; old leper women stretching out hands covered with white ulcers for alms; old moribund skeletons, their legs swollen with elephantiasis, with big fat flies and maggots feeding on the open sores.

On the grounds ordure of all kinds.

And overhead, darting down its perpendicular rays, burns one of those scorching suns that seem to be almost on one's head, the radiating heat roasting one, like a brazier too close to one.

And always, always, the desert for horizon—the infinite flatness of the desert.

. . . . . .

It was there, before the wares displayed by one Bob-Bakary-Diam, that Jean halted with beating heart. Hastily he cast anxious, scrutinising glances upon the hugger-mugger of objects scattered about in front of him.

"Ah, yes, my white man," said Bob-Bakary-Diam in Yolof, with a quiet smile, "the watch that strikes! Four days ago the girl came and sold it to me for three silver *khâliss*. Very sorry, my white man, but as it was a watch that struck, I sold it the very same day to a Trarzas chief, who left with a caravan for Timbuctoo."

. . . . . .

All was over then! He must think no more of the poor old watch. He was overwhelmed with

despair, heartbroken, as if he had lost someone very dear to him, through his own fault.

If only he could have thrown himself into his old father's arms and asked his forgivenness, it would have been some comfort. Had the watch but fallen into the sea, or into the river, or in some corner of the desert! But to have it thus sold and profaned by that miserable Fatou! It was beyond endurance. He could have wept, almost, if his heart had not been too full of rage against the creature.

It was this Fatou who for four years had wasted his money, his dignity, his very life. In order to keep her he had sacrificed promotion; for her sake he had remained in Africa—for the sake of this ill-natured, perverse little creature, black of face and black of soul, all strung about with charms and amulets.

He worked himself up, as he strode along in the sun; her spells inspired him with a kind of superstitious horror, while her spitefulness and impudence, the audacity of her last exploit, roused him to frantic rage.

He returned home, walking rapidly, his blood boiling, his head burning, grief and anger seething within him.

XXXV

Fatou was awaiting his return in great anxiety. As soon as he entered she saw that he had not recovered his treasure—the old watch that struck the hour.

His aspect was so sombre that she thought he was probably going to kill her.

This she could understand. For if any one had taken from her a certain shrivelled amulet, the most precious one that she possessed, given her by her mother when she was a small child in Galam—she, too, would have thrown herself upon the thief and killed him if she could.

She fully realised that she had done something very terrible, driven to it by evil spirits, through her besetting sin, her inordinate love of finery. She knew perfectly well that she had been very wicked. She was sorry to have caused Jean so much pain; she would not mind if he killed her—but she would have liked to kiss him.

She was almost glad, now, when Jean beat her, because it was only on such occasions that he ever touched her and that she could touch him, pressing herself close to him as she pleaded for mercy. This time, when he should seize her in order to kill her, when she had nothing more to risk, she would gather all her strength and cling to him, striving to reach his lips. She would clasp him in her embrace until she was dead—and death was a thing of very little account to her.

. . . . . .

If Jean could have interpreted all that was passing in that little gloomy heart, doubtless, to his sorrow, he would have forgiven her yet again, for it was never difficult to mollify him.

But Fatou did not speak, because she was conscious that nothing of all this could be expressed; moreover, the idea of this supreme struggle, wherein she would

clasp him and embrace him and die at his hands, thus ending everything—the idea of this had a charm for her. She waited for him, fixing her great, lustrous eyes upon him, with an expression of mingled passion and terror.

But Jean had entered without one word, without one glance at her, and then she no longer understood.

He had even thrown away his whip as he entered, ashamed of the brutality he had shown towards a girl, and loath to repeat it.

He merely set to work to tear down all the amulets that were hanging on the walls, and to fling them out of the window.

Then he seized *pagnes*, necklaces, *bou-bous*, calabashes, and, still without a word, he threw them out on to the sand.

And Fatou began to realise what was in prospect; she divined that all was over, and was appalled at the thought.

When all her possessions were thrown out of the window and scattered about the square, Jean showed her the door, saying through his clenched white teeth, in a sullen voice that admitted of no reply, the one word, "Go!"

And Fatou went, with hanging head, without a word. No, she had never conceived a fate so terrible as to be thus driven away. She felt as if she would go mad—and she went, without daring to raise her head, powerless to utter a cry, say a word, or shed a tear.

XXXVI

Then Jean calmly began to put together all his own possessions, folding his clothes neatly as if he were preparing his kit bag. He packed carefully, having acquired unconsciously a habit of orderliness with the regiment. At the same time he hurried over the task, for fear lest he should be seized with regret, and waver in his resolve.

He found some small consolation in this terrible act of vengeance, this satisfaction afforded to the memory of the old watch. He was glad to have had sufficient resolution, and he told himself that soon he would be able to throw himself into his father's arms —confessing all, and obtaining his forgivenness.

When he had finished he went down to Coura n'diaye, the woman *griot*. He saw Fatou, who had taken refuge there, cowering motionless in a corner. The little slave girls had gathered up her possessions from out-of-doors, and had placed them in calabashes by her side.

Jean would not so much as look at her. He approached Coura n'diaye, paid his month's rent, and told her that he was not coming back. Then he threw his light baggage on his back and took his departure.

. . . . . .

Poor old watch! His father had said to him, "Jean, it is rather old, but it's a very good watch; they don't make such good watches nowadays. Later on, when you are rich, you can buy a new-fashioned

one, if you like, but then give me this one back again. I have kept it for forty years; I had it when I was with the regiment. When I am buried, if you no longer need it, do not forget to place it in my coffin. It will be company for me, where I am going."

Coura had taken the spahi's money without offering any comments on his sudden departure, with the indifference of an old courtesan who has outlived all interest in life.

When Jean left the house he called his Laobé dog, who followed him, his ears flat, as if he had grasped the situation and were sorry to go. Then, without turning his head, Jean went his way through the long streets of the dead-alive town in the direction of the barracks.

. . . . . .

PART III

I

After Jean had thus rid himself of Fatou-gaye, he was conscious of a deep feeling of relief at having carried out this act of vengeance. When he had neatly arranged in his soldier's wardrobe the small quantity of baggage he had brought with him from Samba-Hamet's house, he felt freer and happier. He seemed to have advanced a step nearer to his departure, to that blissful, "final discharge" which was now only a few months away.

At the same time he was sorry for Fatou. He had intended to send her his pay once more, to enable her either to set up house anew or to leave the town.

But as he preferred not to see her again, he had entrusted the spahi Muller with this errand.

Muller had visited Samba-Hamet's house and had seen the woman griot. But Fatou had gone.

"She was in great trouble," said the little slave girls in Yolof, forming a circle round him and all talking at once. "In the evening she would not eat the *kouss-kouss* we had made for her."

"During the night," said little Sam-Lélé, "I heard her talking aloud in her sleep, and even the Laobé dogs yapped, which is a very bad sign. But I could not understand what she was saying."

She had undoubtedly gone away a little before sunrise, with her calabashes on her head.

A macauco woman, Bafoufalé-Diop by name, the woman griot's chief slave, a person of a very inquisitive disposition, had followed her from a distance, and had seen her turn off by the wooden bridge, over the narrow arm of the river, in the direction of N'dar-toute.

"She had the look of knowing quite well where she was going."

It was thought in the quarter that she must have sought a refuge in the house of a certain old and very rich Marabout in N'dar-toute, who admired her greatly. Christian or not, she was good-looking enough to be free from all anxiety as to her future.

For some time to come Jean avoided passing Coura n'diaye's dwelling, and it was not long before he had dismissed the matter entirely from his thoughts.

It seemed to him, moreover, as if he had recovered his white man's dignity, which had been sullied through contact with that black flesh.

Now, when he looked back, that feverishness of senses, abnormally excited by the African climate, inspired in him nothing but deep disgust. And he constructed for himself a new scheme of existence, based upon continence and integrity.

In future he meant to live in barracks, like a sensible man. He would save money in order to take back to Jeanne Méry a collection of souvenirs from Senegal—fine mats, which would some day adorn their home, the subject of his dreams; em-

broidered *pagnes*, whose rich colours would evoke the admiration of his countrymen, and which would serve for splendid tablecloths in their household; and above all, earrings and a cross in fine Galam gold, which he would order especially for her from the most skilful native craftsmen. She would wear them for ornament on Sunday when she went to church with the Peyrals, and certainly no other young woman in the village would possess such beautiful jewellery.

. . . . . .

This tall spahi, poor fellow, who had so grave an air, was nursing in his uncultured brain a multitude of almost childish projects, simple dreams of happiness, of family life and tranquil goodness.

At this time, Jean was nearly twenty-six. He looked older than his years, as is usual with men who have led a hard life in the fields, on the sea, or in the army.

He had changed greatly during these five years in Senegal.

His features were more pronounced; he was swarthier and thinner, and had acquired a more soldierly bearing and more of the Arab look. His shoulders had expanded, while his waist had remained slender and supple. His manner of wearing his fez and turning up the ends of his long moustache had a soldierly smartness, which became him to admiration. His strength and remarkable physical beauty inspired in all who came in contact with him a kind of involuntary respect. They distinguished between

him and his comrades in the manner in which they spoke to him.

A painter might have selected him for a consummate type of noble charm and manly perfection.

II

One day Jean received two letters in a single envelope, bearing the postmark of his village. One letter was from his dear old mother, the other from Jeanne.

Letter from Françoise Peyral to her son.

My dear son,—Since my last letter many things have happened which will surprise you very much. But do not worry about them yet. You must do as we do, pray to the good God, and hope for the best.

I will begin by telling you that a new attorney has come into these parts, a young man called M. Prosper Suirot, who is not very much liked with us, being hard on poor people, and underhand by nature. But he is a man with a fine position, that cannot be denied. Well, this M. Suirot has asked your Uncle Méry for Jeanne's hand in marriage, and has been accepted as his son-in-law. Now Méry came here one evening and made a scene; he had applied to your colonels for information about you without telling us, and it appears that he received bad accounts of you. They said that you were living with a negro woman out there; that you kept her, in spite of the remonstrances of your commanding officers, and that it was this that prevented you from becoming quartermaster, that there are bad reports of you out there; many things, my dear son, that I could never have believed, but it was written on a piece of stamped paper, with your regimental crest on it.

Then Jeanne came running to us in tears, vowing that she would never marry Suirot, or be wife to any one but you, my dear Jean, and that she would rather go into a convent.

I enclose a letter which she has written to you, in which she lets you know what you ought to do. She is of age, and very level-headed. Do exactly as she tells you, and write by return of post to your uncle, as she bids you. You will come back to us in ten months' time, my dear son. If you behave well till you obtain your discharge, and pray constantly to the good God, without doubt everything will come right. But we are much worried, as you may imagine. We are afraid, too, that Méry may forbid Jeanne to come and see us again, and that will be a great pity.

Peyral joins me, my dear son, in embracing you, and in begging you to write to us as soon as possible.

Your old mother, who will love you as long as she lives.

FRANÇOISE PEYRAL.

Jeanne Méry to her cousin Jean.

My dear Jean,—I am so unhappy that I wish I could die on the spot. It is a great grief to me that you have never returned, and that you do not talk of coming back soon. And now my parents, backed up by my godfather, want to marry me to that horrid Suirot, of whom I have told you. People din into my ears that he is rich, and that I ought to feel honoured because he has made me an offer. I say no, you may be sure, and I am crying my eyes out.

My dear Jean, I am very unhappy, because everyone is against me. Olivette and Rose laugh when they see me always with red eyes; I think they would be very glad to marry that big booby Suirot, if he would only

have them. As for me, the mere thought of it makes me shudder; and I will positively never marry him. If they drive me to it, I will run away from them all, and go into the convent of St Bruno.

If only I could sometimes pay your people a visit, it would cheer me up to have a talk with your mother, whom I love and respect as if I were her daughter. But as it is, I am given black looks, because I go there too often, and who knows if I shall not soon be forbidden to go at all.

My dear Jean, you must do exactly what I am going to tell you. I hear there are wicked rumours about you; I say to myself that people spread them for the sole purpose of influencing me. But I do not believe one word of all these stories. They are impossible, and no one here knows you as well as I do. All the same, I should be happy if you would say one little word on this subject, and if you would tell me of your affection for me; you know that it is always pleasant to hear about it, even if one is sure of it. And then, write to my father immediately and ask for my hand in marriage, and be sure to promise him that when you are home and my husband, you will always behave like a sensible, steady man, against whom nothing can be said. And then I will beg him on my knees.

The good God pity us, my dear Jean!

Your betrothed for life,

JEANNE MÉRY.

In country places young people are not taught to express in any way the sentiments of the heart. Girls brought up on the land sometimes feel very deeply, but they have no words to utter their emotions and thoughts; the subtle diction of passion

is unknown to them. They cannot explain their feelings, save by the help of simple unimpassioned phrases. Therein lies the whole difference.

Jeanne must have felt very keenly to have written such a letter, and Jean, who spoke the same, simple language, recognised all the firmness and love that underlay it. The fervent loyalty of his betrothed inspired him with confidence and hope; he put into his reply all the tenderness and gratitude that he was able to express. He addressed to his Uncle Méry a formal request for Jeanne's hand, accompanied by very sincere promises of steadiness and good conduct, and then he awaited, without undue anxiety, the return mail from France. . . .

M. Prosper Suirot was a young attorney, narrow-chested and round-shouldered; moreover, a rabid free-thinker, bespattering with atheistic nonsense all the holy things of old; a short-sighted scribbler, whose small, red eyes were protected by smoked glasses. This rival would have appeared an object of pity to Jean, who felt an instinctive repugnance for persons who were plain and of poor physique.

Attracted by Jeanne's dowry and beauty, the little attorney imagined in his foolish conceit that he was doing the peasant girl an honour by the offer of his ugly person and infinitesimal social position. He had even made up his mind that after their marriage, in order to rise to his height, Jeanne, having become a lady, should wear a hat.

. . . . . .

III

Six months had passed. The mails from France had brought poor Jean no very bad news, certainly, but on the other hand none that were very good.

Uncle Méry remained inflexible, but Jeanne no less so, and she always slipped into old Françoise's letter a few loyal and loving words to her betrothed.

Jean himself was full of hope, and never doubted but that everything would be settled without difficulty as soon as he arrived home.

He lost himself more and more in delicious imaginings. . . . After these five years of exile his return to the village glowed with all the colours of an apotheosis. All the dreams of the poor, forlorn soldier centred around that radiant moment. He would take his seat in the village diligence, wearing the big burnoose of his spahi's uniform, and watch the Cevennes coming into sight once more, the familiar skyline of his mountains, the well-known road, the dear old clock-tower, and at last his father's cottage by the roadside. With what rapture would he embrace his beloved old parents!

Then the three of them would go together to see the Mérys. The good people of the village, all the girls, would some running out of their houses to watch him go past. They would admire him in his foreign dress, with the glamour of Africa upon him. He would show Uncle Méry his quartermaster's stripes, which had at last been awarded him, and they would have an irresistible effect. After all, Uncle Méry was kind. True, he had often scolded Jean in

former days, but he had been fond of him, too; Jean had a very plain recollection of this now; he was very sure of it. (To the exile, far away, those who remain at home are always painted in softer colours; they are remembered as affectionate and kind; their defects, their hardness and rancour, are forgotten.)

And so it seemed impossible that Uncle Méry should not suffer himself to be moved when he saw his two children pleading together. He would surely relent and place Jeanne's trembling hand in Jean's. And then, what happiness, what a life of joy and peace, what a Paradise on earth! . . .

At the same time, Jean did not find it so easy to picture himself in the dress worn by the men of his village. Especially he baulked at the unpretentious headgear of a peasant. This transformation was a subject on which he did not care to dwell. It seemed to him that he would no longer, by himself, be the proud spahi he had been, in the accoutrements of former days.

It was in this red uniform that he had learnt to know life. It was on African soil that he had become a man, and more of a man than he guessed. He had an affection for all this—for his Arab fez, his sabre, his horse—this vast, God-forsaken country, this desert of his.

. . . . . .

Jean did not know what disillusion sometimes awaits young men—sailors, soldiers, spahis—when they return to the village which has so often inspired their dreams—left when they were children, and beheld from afar through magic prisms.

Alas! what sadness, what dreary monotony, often awaits these exiles on their return home.

Other unfortunate spahis, like himself acclimatised and enervated in this land of Africa, have sometimes regretted the desolate banks of the Senegal. The long expeditions on horseback, the freer life, the larger light, the boundless horizon—all these things are missed when, having grown accustomed to them, one is cut off from them. In the quiet of home life one feels as it were a craving for the devouring sun, the never-ending heat, a yearning for the desert, and a home sickness for the sand.

IV

In the meanwhile, Boubakar-Ségou, the great negro chief, was making trouble in Diambour and the country of Djiargabar. A rumour of an expedition was in the air; it was discussed at St Louis in the officers' mess; debated and commented upon in a thousand aspects by the soldiers, spahis, riflemen, and marines. It was the talk of the day, and every man had his hope of distinguishing himself, of gaining some advantage, a medal or a step.

Jean, who was approaching the end of his service, resolved to avail himself of this opportunity to make amends for whatever might have been reprehensible in his past behaviour. He dreamed of fastening in his buttonhole the yellow ribbon of the Military Medal, the reward of valour. He longed to signalise his eternal farewell to the black country by some splendid deed of bravery which would immortalise

his name in the spahis' barracks in that corner of the world, where he had lived and suffered so intensely.

Each day there was a rapid interchange of correspondence between the barracks, the naval authorities, and Government. Large sealed covers were delivered at the spahis' quarters, giving the red jackets food for thought. A long and important expedition was anticipated, and the moment was drawing near. The spahis sharpened their great fighting swords, and furbished up their accoutrements with much talk and bravado, much drinking of absinthe, and a great flow of cheerful comment.

V

It was the beginning of October. Jean, who had been on duty since early morning, going from place to place distributing official documents right and left, was on his way to Government House with a large official envelope to deliver as his final charge.

In the long straight street, empty and deserted as a street of Thebes or Memphis, he saw another man in red coming towards him in the sunshine, holding up a letter for him to see. He felt a mournful presentiment, a vague foreboding, and he hastened his step.

It was Sergeant Muller bringing the spahis the French mail, which had arrived from Dakar by caravan an hour ago.

"Here, Peyral, this is for you," he said, handing Jean an envelope bearing the postmark of the humble village he loved.

VI

This letter, which Jean had been expecting for a month, burned in his hands, and he hesitated to read it. He resolved to wait until he had completed his errand before opening it.

He arrived at the railing surrounding Government House; the gate was open, and he entered.

The garden displayed the same lack of animation as the street. A large tame lioness was stretching herself in the sun with the airs of an amorous cat. Ostriches were sleeping on the ground near some stiff, bluish aloes. It was noon—not a soul visible—a silence like that of a necropolis. Yellow palm trees cast never-wavering shadows upon the great, white terraces.

Jean, in his search for someone to speak to, reached the office of the Governor himself, whom he found surrounded by the heads of the various departments of the colonial service.

There, strange to say, they were working strenuously. Serious matters seemed to be under discussion at this hour traditionally consecrated to the repose of the siesta.

In exchange for the cover he delivered, Jean received another addressed to the spahis' commanding officer.

. . . . . .

It contained definite marching orders, which were communicated officially that afternoon, to all the troops in St Louis.

VII

When Jean found himself once more in the deserted street he could restrain himself no longer, and with trembling hands he opened the envelope.

This time it contained only his mother's handwriting—handwriting that was shakier than usual, and stained with tears.

He devoured the lines—dizziness seized him, poor fellow—clasping his head in his hands, he leaned against the wall.

. . . . . .

The packet entrusted to him was very urgent, the Governor had said. He kissed old Françoise's name piously, and went on his way like a drunken man.

. . . . . .

Was this thing possible? It was over, over for ever. They had taken from him, the poor exile, the betrothed of his childish days, whom his old parents had chosen for him.

"The banns are published. The marriage will take place before the month is over. I had been fearing this, my dear son, even since last month; for Jeanne no longer came to see us. But I did not dare to tell you just then for fear of distressing you, since there was nothing that we could do in the matter.

"We are in deep despair. Now, my son, a thought struck Peyral yesterday which has alarmed us; it is that you may not wish to come home again now, but to remain in Africa.

"We are both very old. My good Jean, my dear son, your poor mother begs you on her knees not to let this prevent you from being sensible and from coming back to us soon, as we had expected. Otherwise I would rather die at once, and Peyral too."

. . . . . .

Incoherent, tumultuous thoughts rushed through Jean's brain.

He made a rapid calculation of dates. No! It was not all over yet, it was not yet an accomplished fact. Telegraph! No! What possessed him? There was no telegraphic communication between France and Senegal. And after all, what could he have said? If he could have gone away, leaving everything behind, gone away on some very swift ship, and still have arrived in time, he might have thrown himself at their feet, with supplications and tears, and have yet succeeded in moving them to relent. But so far away! What futility! What impotence! All would be consummated before he could even reach them with his message of grief.

And he felt as if his head were crushed by iron hands, and his breast in the grip of a remorseless vice.

He halted again and reread the letter, and then remembering that he was the bearer of urgent orders from the Governor, he folded up the letter and went on.

. . . . . .

Around him all things were lapped in the profound stillness of noon. The old Moorish houses stood

ranged in straight rows, milk-white beneath the intense blue of the sky. At times, behind their brick walls, the ear of the passer-by might catch some negress's plaintive, drowsy song, or perhaps the eye might light on a small, coal-black negro asleep on a doorstep, lying on his back in the sun, quite naked, with a necklet of coral, forming a dark patch in the midst of universal radiance. On the smooth sand of the streets, the lizards were chasing one another with curious little swaying movements of the head, drawing their tails along the ground and tracing an infinity of fantastic zig-zags, complicated like an Arabic design. A distant noise of *kouss-kouss* pounders, in its monotonous regularity almost a form of silence, came from Guet n'dar, deadened by the hot, heavy strata of the noontide atmosphere.

It seemed as if this tranquillity of prostrate nature were seeking to make mock of poor Jean's emotion, and to intensify his sufferings. It oppressed him like a leaden winding sheet.

Of a sudden this country appeared to him as a vast tomb.

The spahi awoke as if from a heavy sleep that had lasted five years.

He felt himself in fierce revolt, revolt against everything and everyone. Why had they taken him from his village, from his mother, to bury him, in the prime of life, in this country of death?

By what right had they made of him that anomalous being called a spahi, a swashbuckler, half African, an outcast, forgotten of everyone, and at last disowned even by his betrothed.

He felt his heart possessed with frantic rage; he was conscious of a desire to wreak his wrath on some person or some object; a desire to torture, to seize, to crush in his mighty arms a fellow man.

And all around him there was nothing, nothing but silence, and heat, and sand.

. . . . . .

Alas! he had not even one friend in this whole country, not one devoted comrade to whom he could confide his sorrow. Good God! he was indeed forsaken, indeed alone in the world.

VIII

Jean hastened to the barracks and threw the packet entrusted to him to the first person he met. Then he turned away and set off haphazard for a rapid, aimless walk—it was his own method of stifling his sorrow.

He passed the bridge leading to Guet n'dar and turned southwards in the direction of the Point of Barbary, just as he had done that night four years ago when he had fled from Cora's house in despair. . . .

But this time his despair was the deep, supreme despair of a man . . . and his life was wrecked. . . .

For a long time he went southwards, losing sight of St Louis and the negro villages. He sat down exhausted at the foot of a sandy mound overlooking the sea. . . .

His ideas had no sequence. The day's excessive sunshine had disordered his mind. . . .

He noticed that he had never been in this place before, and he began to glance absently about him.

The whole mound bristled with tall posts of a grotesque appearance, bearing inscriptions in the language of the priests of Mahgreb. Bleached bones lay strewn pell-mell upon the ground, unearthed long ago by jackals. There were likewise a few sprays of greenery, lost, as it were, in the midst of absolute aridity. These were garlands of convolvulus, exquisitely fresh, opening here and there their large pink calyces, trailing among old skulls, old arm and leg bones.

At intervals other funereal mounds of grim aspect rose above the level plain.

Great flocks of pelicans, their white feathers tinged with pink, were stalking about the beaches. Seen in the distance through the evening mirage, their forms assumed weird and unnatural proportions. . . .

Evening had come. The sun had sunk down into the ocean, and a cooler breeze had set in from the sea.

Jean took out his mother's letter and began to read it again. . . .

. . . . . .

"Now, my son, a thought struck Peyral yesterday which has alarmed us. It is that you may not wish to come back again now, but to remain in Africa.

"We are both very old. My good Jean, my dear son, your poor mother begs you on her knees not to let this prevent you from being sensible and from coming back to us soon, as we had expected. Otherwise I would rather die at once, and Peyral too."

. . . . . .

Then poor Jean felt his heart break—sobs rent his bosom, and his spirit of revolt dissolved in tears.

IX

Two days later all the warships required for the expedition were assembled to the north of St Louis, in the bend of the river near Pop-n'kior.

The embarkation was carried out in the midst of a great throng of people and a tremendous hubbub. All the women and children of the black riflemen were massed on the banks, screaming to heaven, as if bereft of reason.

Moors who had come by caravan from the interior of the Soudan stood round in circles looking on, with their camels, leather sacks, piles of miscellaneous baggage, and their pretty young wives.

Towards three o'clock the whole flotilla, which was to proceed up the river as far as Dialdé in Galam, was groaning under its freight of men. It got under way in appalling heat.

X

St Louis was receding into the distance. . . . Its level outlines sank lower, fading away until they were mere bluish streaks upon the golden sand. . . . On either side of the river, stretching away until lost to sight, lay vast, unhealthy desert plains, everlastingly hot, everlastingly dreary. . . .

And these tracts were but the approach to this great God-forsaken country—the vestibule of the immense solitudes of Africa. . . .

Jean and the other spahis were embarked on the Falémé, which led the flotilla, and was presently a two days' voyage ahead of the other vessels.

In the very moment of departure Jean had written a hurried reply to poor old Françoise. After consideration, he had decided that he would not deign to write to his betrothed, but in his letter to his mother he had put his whole soul into the task of comforting her, and restoring peace and hope to her mind.

"After all," he had written, "she was too rich for us. We shall have no difficulty in finding some other girl at home who will have me. We will arrange to live in our old house, and then we shall be nearer to you than ever. My dear parents, I think of nothing all day long but the joy of seeing you once more, and I swear that I will never, never leave you again. . . ."

Such, to be sure, was his intention, and it was true that he thought of his dear old parents every day. But the idea of sharing his life with a woman other than Jeanne took the brightness out of everything. It was a terrible thought, which cast a dense, mourning veil upon the joy of his return. . . .

Do what he would to regain his courage, it seemed that he had no longer an object in life, and that the future was a blank wall to him for ever and ever.

Beside him on the bridge of the Falémé was seated the gigantic Nyaor-fall, the black spahi, to whom, as his most faithful friend, Jean had confided his troubles.

Nyaor did not attempt to understand these senti-

ments—Nyaor, whom no one had ever loved, whose thatched roof harboured three purchased wives, whom he intended to sell as soon as they ceased to please him.

Nevertheless he realised that his friend Jean was unhappy. He smiled at him kindly, and to distract him told him negro stories irresistibly soporific.

XI

The flotilla sailed up the river with all possible speed, making fast at sunset and getting under way again at dawn.

At Richard-Toll, the first French outpost, more men, negresses, and material were taken on board.

At Dagana, a two days halt was made, and the Falémé received orders to continue her voyage alone as far as Podor, the last outpost before reaching Galam, where several companies of riflemen had already been concentrated.

XII

The Falémé continued on her way through the vast desert; she plunged swiftly into the interior, sailing up the yellow waters of the narrow river which separates Moorish Sahara from the great mysterious continent with its black population.

Jean, in melancholy mood, saw one desolate region succeeding another. His eyes followed the ever-receding horizon—the winding ribbon of the Senegal

lost in the infinite distance that lay behind him. These accursed plains, unfolding themselves endlessly before his gaze, made a painful impression upon him. He felt a tightening of the heart, as if all the time this whole country were closing in upon him, and he were never to return.

Here and there on the desolate banks great, black vultures stalked solemnly, or bald-headed marabouts, with a suggestion of something human in their profiles.

Sometimes an inquisitive monkey would spring out from the mangrove thicket to watch the ship glide past—or a splendid white heron would rise from the reeds, or a kingfisher in its sheen of emerald and lapis lazuli, disturbing in its flight a sluggish crocodile asleep on the mud.

On the south bank—the bank pertaining to the sons of Ham—an occasional village would appear, lost in the midst of this vast region of desolation.

The existence of these human habitations were advertised from a great distance by two or three gigantic palm trees, with fan-shaped leaves, huge fetish trees, as it were, keeping watch over the towns.

In the midst of the great bare plain, these palm trees had the appearance of giants lying in wait in the desert. Their perfectly straight, highly polished, greyish pink trunks were thickened like Byzantine columns, and displayed at the top scanty bunches of leaves, as stiff as if cut from iron plate.

Presently, as one drew nearer, one could discern a negro anthill, huts with peaked roofs, grouped in compact masses at the foot of the palm trees, pro-

dusing a general effect of greyness against the unvarying yellow of the sands.

Some of these African cities had a large population; all were surrounded by thick, gloomy *tatas*—walls made of earth and wood, and erected as a protection against enemies and wild beasts. A tattered piece of white cloth, floating from a roof loftier than the rest, marked the dwelling of the chief.

At the gates of their ramparts sombre figures showed themselves, aged chiefs, aged priests covered with amulets, their long, black arms contrasting with the whiteness of their flowing robes. They watched the Falémé pass, her rifles and guns ready to open fire at the slightest sign of hostile intention.

One might well ask what means of subsistence these men possessed, what lives they led, what occupations they pursued behind those grey walls—these beings who knew nothing of the outer world, nothing beyond the solitudes and the merciless sun.

On the north bank—where the Sahara lies—there was more sand, more desolation, but of a different aspect.

In the distance, very far away, shone out great fires of grass kindled by the Moors, with columns of smoke rising straight up in the still air to an incredible height. On the horizon, chains of hills showed up, intensely red, like burning coals, resembling, amid these columns of smoke, an unlimited succession of furnaces.

And there, where there was nothing but arid ground and scorching sand, a perpetual mirage produced the semblance of great lakes, wherein the

whole conflagration was reflected and reversed. Little wisps of quivering vapour, such as rise from a furnace, wove above all this a shifting web. The delusive landscapes shimmered and vibrated in the intense heat, and then could be seen changing shape and dissolving like visions. The eyes were dazzled and wearied by the sight of them.

From time to time on this bank appeared groups of men of pure white race—wild-looking and bronzed indeed, but with features of regular beauty, and with long curling hair, which gave them a look of Biblical prophets. They went bare-headed under that terrible sun, arrayed in flowing robes of dark blue. These were Moors of the tribe of Braknas or Tzarzas, bandits to a man, plunderers, robbers of caravans—the most lawless of all the tribes of Africa.

XIII

The east wind, which is like the mighty respiration of the Sahara, had sprung up, gaining strength by degrees as the distance from the sea increased.

This parching wind, hot like a blast from a forge, now blew across the desert. It covered all things with a fine sandy dust, and brought with it the burning thirst of *Bled-el-Ateuch*. The awnings that sheltered the spahis had to be continually watered by a negro, whose hosepipe traced rapid arabesques which disappeared as quickly as they were made, evaporating almost immediately in the parched atmosphere.

And now the ship was approaching Podor, one of

the largest towns on the river, and the Sahara bank began to show signs of life.

This was the entrance to the country of the Douaïch, shepherds grown rich through cattle raids upon the negro territory.

These Moors used to swim their long caravans across the Senegal, driving before them the stolen cattle. Presently camps came into view, pitched upon the never-ending plain. The camelskin tents, stretched between wooden stakes, resembled huge bats' wings spread out upon the sand; they formed weird patterns of an intense black in the midst of a country that was of a uniform, unvarying yellow. Everywhere there were somewhat increased signs of animation, of activity and life.

On the banks larger groups of people came running to see the ship. Moorish women, beautiful, copper-coloured creatures, half dressed, with frontlets of coral, trotted up, sitting astride their small, hump-backed cows; and often there were children scampering along behind them on tiny frisky calves; naked children, their heads shaven, except for great tufts of flowing mane, their bodies tawny and muscular as those of young satyrs.

. . . . . .

XIV

Podor is an important French post on the southern bank of the Senegal, and is one of the hottest places in the world.

It is a strong fortress, fissured by the heat of the

sun. A street, tolerably shady, runs alongside the river; it consists of a few houses that are old already and sombre of aspect. You may see there some French farmers of revenue, yellow with fever and anæmia; Moorish or negro pedlars squatting on the sand; all the costumes and amulets known to Africa; sacks of ground nuts, bales of ostrich feathers, and elsewhere ivory and gold dust.

Behind this semi-European street lies a large negro town built of thatch. The town is divided into sections like honeycomb, by wide straight streets. Each of its quarters is bounded by thick wooden palisades, and fortified like a citadel.

In the evening Jean wandered about the town, with his friend Nyaor for companion. The mournful songs that floated to his ears from behind those walls, those strange voices, that unfamiliar aspect of things, that hot wind, ceasing neither day nor night, inspired him with a kind of vague terror, an inexplicable anguish, compounded of home sickness and loneliness and hopelessness all in one.

Never, not even in the distant outposts of Diakhallénée had he felt so completely alone, so utterly forsaken.

Podor was surrounded by fields of millet; a few stunted trees grew there, some brushwood, some scanty grass.

On the Moorish bank opposite lay absolute desert. Yet at the entrance to a road, of which scarcely the beginnings existed, and which soon lost its identity in the sands to the north, stood a signpost with this prophetic inscription: "*To Algiers.*"

XV

It was five in the morning; the red lustreless sun was rising over the land of the Douaïch. Jean returned to the Falémé, which was preparing to resume its voyage. The negro women who were travelling by the Falémé were already lying on the deck, rolled in their variegated *pagnes*, packed together so tightly that nothing could be distinguished on the ground but a confused heap of drapery, gilded by the morning light, with here and there a black, heavily braceletted arm waving in the air.

Jean, who was making his way between them, suddenly felt himself seized by two supple arms that wound themselves like two serpents around his legs.

The woman was hiding her head and kissing his feet.

"Tjean! Tjean!" . . . said a queer little voice, well known to him. "I have followed you for fear you should gain Paradise (be killed) in the war. Tjean, won't you look at your son?"

And the two black arms lifted up a bronzed child and held him towards the spahi.

"My son? my son?" repeated Jean in his brusque soldier's way, yet in a voice that trembled nevertheless, "my son? What nonsense are you talking, Fatou?"

. . . . . .

"But it's true all the same," he added, strangely moved, bending down to look at the child, "It's true all the same; he is nearly white."

The child had none of his mother's blood in his veins; he was Jean's son entirely. He was bronzed, but essentially white like the spahi; he had the same deep eyes, the same beauty. He stretched out his hands and looked about him, knitting his little brows with an expression of precocious seriousness, as if wondering what fate had in store for him, and how his Cevennes blood came to be mingled with that of this impure black race.

Jean felt himself vanquished by some strange inner force, a troubling and mysterious emotion; he bent down and kissed his son gently with silent tenderness. Sentiments hitherto unknown penetrated to the very depths of his soul.

The voice of Fatou-gaye, moreover, had awakened in his heart a host of sleeping echoes. The fever of the senses, the habit of possession had linked them together with those strong and enduring bonds which separation can scarcely destroy.

And then Fatou, at least, was faithful to him in her own way, and besides he was so abjectly forlorn, poor fellow. . . .

So he let her hang an African amulet round his neck, and then shared his day's ration with her.

. . . . . .

XVI

The ship continued her voyage. The river flowed in a more southernly direction, and the aspect of the country began to change.

Shrubs now grew on both banks, slim gum trees, mimosas, tamarisks with delicate foliage, grass and green sward. There were no signs of tropical flora; one might have fancied it the less luxurious vegetation of northern latitudes.

Apart from this excessive heat and silence there was nothing now to suggest that it was the heart of Africa—one might have imagined oneself on some peaceful European stream.

However, from time to time some idyll of negro character could be witnessed. In groves that might have served as a setting for a Watteau pastoral, the eye would light upon an amorous negro pair, decked with grigris and bead necklaces, pasturing lean zebus or herds of goats.

Further on were other herds that no one shepherded, herds of grey crocodiles, hundreds of them asleep in the sun, submerged belly-deep in the warm waters.

And Fatou-gaye would smile. Her eyes would light up with a strange joy, for she recognised the approach of Galam, her native land.

None the less there was one thing that kept her uneasy. When she passed great, grass-grown marshes, wide, gloomy pools, bordered with mangroves, she would shut her eyes for fear of seeing the black muzzle of a hippopotamus (n'gabou) emerging from the stagnant waters. For her and hers, such an apparition would have been an omen of death.

It would be impossible to describe the ruses, the importunity, the ingenuity she had brought to bear

in order to secure a passage on this ship on which she knew Jean had embarked.

Where had she taken refuge when she left the house of the griot? In what lair had she hidden herself to bring the spahi's child into the world?

Now, at any rate, she was happy. She was on her way back to Galam, and Jean was with her; her dream had come true.

. . . . . .

XVII

Dialdé was situated at the confluence of the Senegal and a nameless stream, a tributary which flowed in from the south.

The post consisted of an unimportant negro village and a small protecting blockhouse of French construction, resembling the isolated forts of Upper Algeria.

It was the nearest point to the country of Boubakar-Ségou, and here in the midst of tribes that were still friendly, the French forces were to effect a junction, and to camp with the allied army of the Bambaras.

The flat country surrounding the village had the same monotony and aridity that characterised the banks of the lower Senegal.

None the less clumps of trees, or forests even, were already to be seen, indicating that this was the threshold of the land of Galam, the wooded regions of the interior.

XVIII

It is the first reconnaissance made in the tract of country to the east of the encampment of Dialdé, towards Djidiam, and it is carried out by Jean, Sergeant Muller, and tall Nyaor.

According to the report of timid old women of the friendly tribe, fresh tracks of a large body of foot soldiers and mounted men, who could be no other than the army of the great black chief, had been seen on the sand.

For two hours the three mounted spahis patrolled the plain in all directions, but discovered no human footprint, nor any trace of the passage of an army.

On the other hand, the ground was covered with the spoor of all the fauna of Africa—from the great round pit made by the heavy foot of the hippopotamus to the dainty little triangular hoofprint of the light-stepping gazelle. The sand, hardened by the last showers of the winter season, preserved faithfully all the impressions made upon it by the denizens of the wild. The paws of monkeys, the great straggling stride of giraffes, the tracks of lizards and serpents, the pads of tigers and lions were visible. One might have traced the stealthy comings and goings of jackals, the prodigious leaps of hunted deer. There were suggestions of all the terrible vitality which darkness unchains in these deserts—deserts that lie so silent under the burning eye of the sun. One could form a picture of the saturnalia of wild life bursting forth under cover of darkness.

All the wild fowl lurking in the brushwood rose

up, startled by the three spahis' horses. It was miraculous shooting country. Red partridges, guinea fowl, blue jays, pink jays, sheeny blackbirds, and huge bustards flew across the very muzzles of their rifles. But the spahis let them all go, still continuing their vain search for human tracks.

It was nearly evening, and dense vapours were gathering on the horizon. The sky had that heavy, torpid aspect, such as the imagination pictures at the setting of antediluvian suns—at the period when the atmosphere, more torrid, more heavily charged with vital essences, was maturing on primitive earth the monstrous germs of the mammoth and the pleiosaurus.

The sun sank slowly down among the strange veils; it grew lustreless, livid, rayless; distorted and disproportionately magnified; and then at last its light was quenched.

Nyaor, who until that moment had followed Muller and Jean with his customary insouciance, remarked that it would be imprudent to pursue the reconnaissance further, and that the two *toubabs*, his friends, would be unnecessarily rash if they persisted.

Actually there was a possibility of every kind of surprise attack, and danger might be lurking all around them. Moreover, there were everywhere fresh spoor of lions; the horses began to stop dead and to sniff at the five claw marks so clearly defined on the level sand, and to tremble with terror. . . .

After consultation, Jean and Sergeant Muller decided to turn, and soon the three horses were racing like the wind in the direction of the blockhouse, the

white burnooses of their riders floating behind them. In the distance, that awe-inspiring cavernous voice, which the Moors liken to thunder, began to make itself heard : the roar of the hunting lion.

They were brave men, these three, galloping there, yet they experienced that kind of vertigo which is produced by excessive speed ; the contagion of that dread which was spurring on their maddened beasts. The reeds which bent under them, the branches that whipped their legs, seemed to them troops of lions of the desert, bounding in pursuit of them. . . .

Soon they were within sight of the stream which separated them from the French tents, the inhabited world, and the little Arab blockhouse of the village of Dialdé, still glowing with the last red rays of sunset.

They swam their horses across and re-entered the camp.

XIX

It was the evening hour, with its atmosphere of intense melancholy. Sunset awakened this obscure village to a kind of animation all its own. The black herdsmen were driving home their flocks; the warriors of the tribe, busy with their preparations for battle, were sharpening their fighting knives, and furbishing up their prehistoric guns. The women were making *kouss-kouss*, to serve as provisions for the army, and were milking their ewes and lean zebu cows. A confused murmur of negro voices arose, mingled with the querulous bleating of goats and the plaintive yelping of Laobé dogs. . . .

Fatou was there, seated at the door of the blockhouse with her child, in the humble, suppliant attitude she had continued to adopt since her return.

And Jean, his heart oppressed with solitude, came and sat beside her, and took the child on his knee with a feeling of tenderness towards his black family in its happiness, and of finding at Dialdé in Galam someone who loved him.

Near them the griots were rehearsing their warlike songs. They were chanting softly, in mournful, falsetto voices, accompanying themselves on small primitive guitars, consisting of two strings stretched upon serpent skin, producing a faint sound like the stridulation of crickets. They were singing these African airs that harmonise so well with the desolation of their country and have a charm of their own, with their elusive rhythm and their monotony. . . .

Jean's son was a delightful baby, but very solemn, and was seldom seen to smile. He was dressed in a blue bou-bou and a necklace, like a Yolof child, but his head was not shaved or ornamented with little tails of hair, as is usual with children of the country. As he was a little " white " boy, his mother had let his curly hair grow, and one lock fell across his forehead, as with Jean.

Jean remained there a long time, seated at the door of the blockhouse, playing with his son.

The last rays of daylight fell upon this singular picture; the child with his angel face, the spahi with his soldierly beauty, playing together alongside of those sinister dark minstrels.

Fatou-gaye was seated at their feet contemplating

the pair with adoring eyes, crouching on the ground before them like a dog at its master's feet.

Poor Jean had remained very much of a child, as is commonly the case with young men who have led a hard life, and whose precocious physical development has endowed them early with a mature and serious manner. He dandled his son on his knees with soldierly awkwardness, constantly bursting into peals of fresh, youthful laughter. But the child, the spahi's son, did not laugh much; he put his chubby arms round his father's neck and nestled close to his breast, looking about him with a very solemn air. . . .

When night fell, Jean disposed of them both safely in the interior of the blockhouse; then he gave Fatou all the money he had left, three *khâliss* (fifteen francs). . . .

"See," he said, "to-morrow you will buy *kouss-kouss* for yourself and good milk for him."

. . . . . .

XX

Then he made his way towards the camp, so that he, too, might lie down and sleep.

To reach the French tents, he had to pass through the camp of the allied Bambaras. The night was of a luminous transparency, and everywhere the whirring noises of insects were audible; one grew aware that there were thousands and thousands of crickets and cicadas under every blade of grass, in each little hole in the sand. Sometimes the concerted

effect of all these whirring sounds was strident and deafening, as if the whole vast country were covered with an infinite number of tiny bells and rattles, and then momentarily the whole din would seem to die down, as if all these crickets had passed the word for silence, and there was a sudden hush.

Lost in thought, Jean went his way. He was very dreamy this evening. . . . And as he mused, without looking where he was going, he found himself engulfed suddenly in a great circle of men, who kept revolving around him in the rhythm of a dance. (The circular dance is the form specially favoured by the Bambaras.)

The dancers were men of lofty stature, wearing long white robes and high turbans, likewise white, with two black horns.

And in the transparent night the circle revolved almost noiselessly; the movement was slow, but light-footed as a spirit dance. The sweep of the draperies gave forth rustling sounds like the feathers of great birds. . . . And the dancers, all in unison, assumed various poses, poised on tiptoe, swaying backwards or forwards, flinging out in one simultaneous movement their long arms, and thus spreading out, like transparent wings, the innumerable folds of their muslin robes.

There was a soft accompaniment of tom-toms, as if muted; the wailing flutes and the ivory horns sounded muffled and remote. This monotonous music, which gave the tune to the circular dance of the Bambaras, resembled a magical incantation.

And all the dancers, as they passed the spahi, bent

their heads towards him as a sign of recognition, and smiled as they said to him,

" Tjean, come into our dance." . . .

Jean also recognised most of them in their festal robes; they were black spahis or riflemen, who had donned the long white *bou-bou* and the *temba-sembé*, the ceremonial headdress.

Jean smiled and greeted them as he made his way through,

" Good evening, Niodagal; good evening, Imobé-Fafandou; good evening, Dempa-Taco and Samba-Fall; good evening, big Nyaor," for Nyaor was there, too, one of the tallest and handsomest. . . .

But nonetheless Jean quickened his step, anxious to shake off these long coils of white-robed dancers, ever winding and unwinding themselves around him.

All this was affecting him—the night, the dance, and the music, which seemed to be that of another world.

. . . . . .

And ever they repeated, " Tjean, come into our dance," and they continued to flit around him like visions, sportively encircling him, purposely extending their winding chain to prevent him from making his escape. . . .

XXI

As soon as Jean had lain down in his tent, he set himself to work out a whole host of new plans for the future.

He was certainly going back first of all to see his old father and mother. Nothing should induce him to postpone this visit. But after that he would undoubtedly have to return to Africa, now that he had a son. He realised clearly that he already loved this little child of his with all his heart, and that no consideration on earth could induce him to abandon him.

. . . . . .

Without, in the Bambara encampment, could be heard at regular intervals the voices of the griots, chanting on three dismal notes the sacred war cry. They cast this owl-like chant over the slumbering tents, and lulled the black warriors into their first sleep with exhortations to be brave, and to load their carbines with several bullets at once on the day of battle.

Everyone was aware that the day was close at hand, and Boubakar-Ségou not far off.

. . . . . .

What should he do at St Louis when he came back after his leave and reclaimed his little son? Should he re-enlist? Or would it be better to try his fortune in some independent adventure? . . .

He might perhaps become a farmer of revenue on the river. No, he felt an invincible repugnance to any other professions than those of agriculture and arms.

. . . . . .

All sounds of life were now hushed in the village of Dialdé, and the encampment itself was silent. From afar could be heard the lion's roar, and every now and then the most dismal sound in the world, the howling of jackals, a dirge-like accompaniment to the poor spahi's dream. . . .

. . . . . .

From every point of view the existence of that small child was making a complete change in all his plans, rendering the difficulties of the future infinitely more complicated. . . .

" Tjean, come into our dance ! "

Jean, worn out by the day's long expedition, was half asleep, and even as he planned for his future, he saw in a dream the Bambara dance ever slowly revolving around him. The dancers flitted past with smooth movements of the limbs, languishing attitudes, to the strains of a vague music wherein there was something unearthly.

" Tjean, come into our dance ! "

Their heads, inclining towards Jean in greeting, seemed to be bent under the burden of their lofty ceremonial headdress. And now again he saw grinning faces, death-like, leaning towards him with an air of recognition, and saying very softly with phantom smiles,

" Tjean, come into our dance."

. . . . . .

Finally, little by little, Jean was completely overcome by weariness, and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. But he had decided nothing. . . .

XXII

The great day, the bay of battle, had come.

At three in the morning the whole encampment of Dialdé was astir—spahis, riflemen, Bambara friendlies, were getting ready to set out on their march, with their arms and ammunition.

The Marabouts had prayed at great length; numbers of talismans had been distributed. By order of the chiefs the black warriors, according to their custom on the occasion of great battles, had loaded their carbines with powder half-way up the barrel and with bullets up to the muzzle. With such thoroughness had they carried out the order that most of the firearms burst at the first discharge, not an infrequent occurrence in negro warfare.

The orders were to make for the village of Djidiam, where, according to the report of the native scouts, Boubakar-Ségou had ensconced himself with his army behind thick palisades of timber and mud. Djidiam was the principal fortress of this personage, who had become almost legendary, the terror of the country—a sort of fabulous hero, whose strength lay in retreat, in hiding himself always in the recesses of his murderous country, and in baffling discovery.

They were to camp during the afternoon in the great woods adjoining the enemy headquarters, and finally to fall upon Djidiam by night, to set fire to the village, which would burn in the moonlight like an *auto-da-fé* of straw. Then they were to return victorious to St Louis, before fever should have had time to decimate the expedition.

On the eve of battle Jean had written a very affectionate letter to his old parents—a poor, pencilled letter! It went down the river by the Falémé on that very day, and must have soothed the heart of his old mother, in that far country. . . .

A little before sunrise he kissed his child, who lay asleep in the arms of Fatou-gaye. Then he mounted his horse.

XXIII

In the early morning Fatou-gaye, with her son in her arms, likewise took the road. She made her way to Nialoumbaé, a village belonging to a friendly tribe, the dwelling place of a famous Marabout, a preacher renowned for the arts of prediction and sorcery.

She asked her way to the hut of this centenarian, whom she found prostrate on his mat, muttering, like a dying man, prayers to his deity.

They had a long interview, and it resulted in the priest putting into the girl's hands a small leather pouch, seemingly containing something very precious; and this pouch Fatou secured carefully in her waistband.

Then the Marabout administered a sleeping draught to Jean's child, and in exchange Fatou offered the priest three large silver coins, the spahi's last *khâliss*, which the old man put away in his purse. Then Fatou tenderly wrapped her son, already sunk into a charmed sleep, in an embroidered *pagne*, fastened the precious burden on to her back, and had

herself directed to the woods, where the French were to camp that evening.

XXIV

It is seven in the morning, the scene a forlorn spot in the country of Diambour, a grass-covered marsh, surrounding a small sheet of water.

To the north a low hill bounds the horizon. Southwards as far as the eye can see stretch the great levels of Dialakar.

All is still and desolate; the sun mounts tranquilly into an azure sky.

In this African landscape, which would have fitted equally well into some solitary tract of ancient Gaul, horsemen come into view. They sit their horses proudly, handsome fellows all of them, in their red jackets, blue pantaloons, large white hats slouched over their bronzed faces. There are twelve of them, twelve spahis sent out as scouts in charge of an adjutant, and Jean is one of them.

The air holds no presage of death, no foreboding of ill-omen, nothing but the calmness and purity of the heavens. In the marshes the tall grasses, still wet with the dews of night, are sparkling in the sun; dragon flies are hovering on their long, black-flecked wings; waterlilies are opening their large white calyces.

The heat is already oppressive; the horses stretch their necks to drink, their nostrils wide, sniffing the stagnant water. The spahis halt for a moment to

take counsel; they dismount in order to moisten their hats and bathe their foreheads.

Suddenly in the distance dull sounds are heard, like the noise of enormous drums all beaten simultaneously.

"It is the big tom-toms," said Sergeant Muller, who had some experience of negro warfare.

Instinctively all the men who had dismounted made for their horses.

But a black head had just raised itself above the herbage. An old Marabout had made with his skinny arm a grotesque signal, like a magic order addressed to the reeds of the marsh. A hail of lead showered down upon the spahis.

. . . . . .

The shots, steadily and carefully aimed from the shelter of the ambuscade, had all told. Five or six horses had dropped. The remainder, startled and maddened, reared and threw their wounded riders. Jean, also, had sunk to the ground with a bullet through his loins. At the same time, thirty sinister faces emerged from the grass; thirty black demons, covered with mud, bounded out, gnashing their white teeth like enraged monkeys.

O heroic combat, such as Homer might have sung, but which will remain unrecorded, unknown to fame, like so many of these far-away African frays. The poor spahis, in their fight to the death, performed prodigies of strength and valour. Fighting had on them the infuriating effect, which it produces on all such as are brave by nature. They sold

their lives dearly, these men, all of whom were young, vigorous, and inured to war. In a few years they will be forgotten, even at St Louis. Who will ever mention their names, the names of those who fell in the land of Diambour, on the plains of Dialakar?

. . . . . .

Meanwhile the sound of the great war-drums was drawing ever nearer.

Suddenly, while the mêlée was still proceeding, the spahis saw as in a dream, a great company of negroes passing by over the hill; warriors half naked, covered with grigris, were doubling in the direction of Dialdé in disorderly hordes. They had with them enormous war-drums, which four men together could hardly drag along. Their lean desert horses, seemingly full of fire and fury, were decked with tawdry harness, spangled with copper, their long tails and manes stained blood-red. It was a fantastic, demoniac procession, an African nightmare, swifter than the wind.

Boubakar-Ségou was passing.

He was on his way to hurl himself on the French forces.

He passed, paying no attention to the spahis, leaving them to the body of men who had lain in ambush for them, and were completing the work of exterminating them.

The spahis were being driven steadily back, away from the grass and water on to the arid sands, where a more overwhelming heat and an intenser glare would the sooner exhaust them.

No one had had time to reload. They fought with knives, sabres, nails, and teeth; there were many gaping wounds and bleeding bodies.

Two negroes had made a ferocious attack on Jean. He was stronger than they. In his fury he hurled them to earth time after time, but they always came back at him.

In the end his hands, slipping in blood, could no longer obtain a grip on the black, oily naked skins, and all the time his strength was ebbing because of his wounds.

He had a confused perception of these final impressions; his dead comrades, fallen by his side; the main body of the negro army ever hastening onwards, and now almost out of sight; handsome Muller near him, with the death rattle in his throat, and the blood pouring from his mouth; and further over, already at some distance, tall Nyaor cutting his way through towards Saldé, mowing a path with great sweeps of his sabre through a group of negroes.

. . . . . .

And then three of them felled Jean to the ground, threw him on his side, holding his arms, while one of them pressed a large iron knife against his chest.

. . . For one terrifying moment of anguish Jean felt the pressure of this knife against his body. And there was not one human being to help him. All were dead, not a man was left.

The red cloth of his jacket, the coarse fabric of his soldier's shirt, and his flesh formed a triple layer

which offered resistance, and the knife had been badly sharpened.

The negro leaned more heavily. Jean uttered a loud, hoarse cry, and of a sudden his side was pierced. The blade, with a horrible little sound of slicing, plunged into the depths of his chest. The negro turned it in the wound, then tore it out with both hands, and kicked away the body with his foot.

. . . . . .

Jean was the last to fall. The black demons raised their shout of victory and ran on without a moment's delay, speeding like the wind in pursuit of their army.

The spahis were left alone; and the stillness of death descended upon them.

. . . . . .

XXV

The main shock of the two armies took place further away, and was very bloody, although little was heard of it in France.

These minor battles, fought in a country so remote, and engaging a comparatively small number of soldiers, escape the notice of the general public; only those remember them who have lost a son or a brother.

The little French force was wavering when Boubakar-Ségou received, almost point-blank, a charge of slugs in the right temple.

The brains of the negro chief were scattered

abroad. To the sound of the tabala and the iron cymbals he fell, surrounded by his priests, and entangled in his long strings of amulets. For his tribes, his fall was the signal for retreat.

The negro army resumed its march towards the impenetrable tracts of the interior, and no obstacle was opposed to its flight. The French army, indeed, was no longer in any condition to pursue them.

The red head-band of the great rebel chief was brought back to St Louis. It was all singed and riddled with shot holes. A long festoon of talismans was suspended from it, consisting of little pouches covered with various sorts of embroidery, and containing mysterious powders, cabalistic drawings, and prayers in the Maghreb tongue.

Boubakar-Ségou's death produced a far-reaching moral effect upon the indigenous population. Inasmuch as the battle was followed by the submission of several insurgent chiefs, it might fairly be considered a victory.

The expeditionary force returned to St Louis immediately. Promotions and decorations were conferred on all the participators, but there were many gaps in the ranks of the poor spahis.

XXVI

Jean dragged himself under the scanty foliage of the tamarisks, sought a shady spot for his head, and disposed himself there to await death.

He suffered from thirst, burning thirst, and pre-

sently his throat was convulsed by slight, spasmodic movements.

He had often witnessed the death of comrades in Africa, and he recognised this distressing indication of the approaching end, which people call the death sob.

The blood was trickling from his side, and the arid sand drank it as if it were dew.

But his sufferings diminished. Indeed, apart from this burning thirst, he was now in little pain.

Strange visions passed before poor Jean's eyes: the mountain range of the Cevennes, the well-known haunts of his childhood, his cottage in the mountains.

Above all he saw visions of leafy landscapes, full of shade, mosses, coolness, and running water; his dear old mother, who took him gently by the hand to lead him as she had done in his childhood.

He felt his mother's kiss! O, his mother, there she was, smoothing his brow with her poor old trembling hands, bathing his burning head with cool water. Could it be? Never more to feel a mother's kiss, never more to hear her voice? Never, never more? Was this the end of everything? To die there alone, all alone, in the burning sun of the desert! And he half-raised himself, unwilling to die.

. . . . . .

"Tjean, come into our dance!"

In front of him, like a whirlwind, like a furious gale, swept the circle of phantom dancers. The fierce gyrations of this vortex seemed to strike sparks from the burning pebbles.

And these spectral dancers, rising in swift spirals, like smoke before a rushing wind, faded away on high, in the fiery crucible of the blue ether.

Jean had the sensation of rising with them, of being borne aloft on terrible wings, and it came to him that this was the climax, the very moment of death.

But it was merely a convulsion of the muscles, a horrible pang of pain.

The red blood gushed from his mouth, and again a voice, whispering at his ear, said,

"Tjean, come into our dance."

He grew calmer; his sufferings abated, and once more he sank down on his bed of sand.

. . . . . .

Thronging memories of childhood came to life again in his mind, with singular clearness. He heard an old folksong, wherewith his mother used to lull him to sleep when he was a baby in his cradle; then suddenly, in the midst of the desert, the village chime rang out the evening Angelus.

Tears coursed down his bronzed cheeks. The prayers of long ago returned to his memory, and the poor soldier set himself to praying with the fervour of a child. He took between his hands the medal of the Virgin, which his mother had hung round his neck. He still had sufficient strength to raise it to his lips, and he kissed it with immeasurable love. He prayed with all his soul to Our Lady of Sorrows, to whom his simple-minded mother was wont to pray on his behalf each evening. He was steeped in the splen-

dour of those radiant hallucinations that surround a deathbed; and aloud, in the overwhelming silence of these solitudes, he repeated, in a fast-failing voice, the inevitable adieu, "Farewell, farewell, until we meet in heaven."

It was close on noon. Jean's sufferings were diminishing. The desert in the intense tropical light seemed to him like a great brasier of white fire which no longer had power to burn him. And yet his bosom heaved as if to breathe more deeply; his mouth opened as if to plead for water.

. . . . . .

At last his lower jaw dropped; his mouth fell open for the last time, and Jean passed peacefully away in the dazzling sunshine.

. . . . . .

XXVII

When Fatou-gaye returned from the village of the great Marabout, bringing with her a mysterious article in a leather wallet, the women of the friendly tribe informed her that the battle was over.

Anxious, panting, exhausted, she made her way back to camp, hastening with feverish step over the hot sand, and carrying on her back her still-sleeping baby, wrapped in a piece of blue cloth.

The first person she met was the Mussulman, Nyaor-fall, the black spahi, who, as she approached, looked at her gravely, telling the beads of his long Maghreb rosary.

In the language of the country, she jerked out the words,

"Where is he?"

With a restrained gesture, Nyaor stretched his arm towards the south of Diambourg, the open plains of Dialakar.

"Yonder!" . . . said he. "He has gained Paradise." . . .

XXVIII

All day long Fatou-gaye traversed with feverish step thickets and sand, still carrying her sleeping baby on her back. She went to and fro, sometimes breaking into a run, with the distracted movements of a pantheress that has lost her young. Ever she pursued her search under the burning sun, exploring the thickets, groping in the thorny brushwood.

. . . . . .

About three in the afternoon, as she was crossing an arid plain, she caught sight of a dead horse, then of a red jacket, then another, and yet another. . . . It was the scene of the defeat. It was there that the spahis had fallen. . . .

Here and there a sparse growth of mimosas and tamarisks cast upon the yellow soil slender shadows, sun-chequered. . . .

In the remote distance, at the end of this vast plain, the sky-line of a village of pointed huts could be seen against the deep blue of the horizon.

Fatou-gaye had halted, trembling and terrified.

. . . She had recognised him, Jean, yonder, stretched out in the sun, with stiffened arms and open mouth. She muttered some obscure, heathen invocation and touched the grigris round her ebony neck.

With haggard, bloodshot eyes, she stood there a long time, muttering softly to herself. . . .

From afar she caught sight of some old women of the enemy tribe, who were making for the corpses, and a horrible surmise flashed upon her. . . .

These hideous old negresses, their skins glistening under the tropic sun, diffused an acrid odour of soumaré. With a jingling of grigris and beads they approached the young soldiers. They stirred them with their feet; as they desecrated them with obscene touch they laughed and uttered mocking ejaculations, resembling the gibbering of monkeys. They profaned these corpses with gruesome buffoonery. . . .

And then they stripped them of their gilt buttons, which they stuck in their frizzled hair; they took from them their steel spurs, their red jackets, their belts. . . .

Fatou-gaye was crouching behind her clump of brushwood, holding herself back, like a cat about to spring. When it came to Jean's turn, she leaped out, her nails in readiness, uttering cries like a wild beast, and reviling the negro women in a strange tongue. . . .

And the baby, who had woken up, clung to the back of his raging, terrifying mother. . . .

The negro women were afraid and drew back. . . .

Besides, their arms were full enough of booty, and

they thought they could come back again on the morrow. They exchanged some words, which Fatou could not understand, and took their departure, turning round, however, to insult her with savage laughter and the mocking gestures of chimpanzees.

. . . . . .

When Fatou-gaye was alone, she crouched close to Jean and called him by his name. Three times she cried, " Tjean ! Tjean ! Tjean ! " in shrill tones, which echoed in these solitudes like the voice of a priestess of old who invokes the dead. . . .

There she lay, crouching under the implacable African sun, with unseeing gaze fixed on the distance on the parched and desolate landscape. She was afraid to turn her eyes on Jean's face.

The vultures swooped down insolently towards her, beating the heavy air with their great dark pinions. . . .

They hovered near the corpses, not yet daring . . . it was too soon.

. . . . . .

Fatou-gaye caught sight of the medal of the Virgin in the spahi's hand, and understood that he had been praying when death came to him. She, too, had medals of the Virgin and a scapulary among the grigris round her neck. She had been baptised by Catholic priests at St Louis, but it was not in them that she put her trust.

She took a leather amulet, which formerly in the land of Galam a negro woman, her mother had given her. This was the fetish she loved, and she kissed it with ardour.

Then she bent over Jean's body and raised his head.

Blue flies kept coming out from his open mouth, between his white teeth, and from the wounds in his thorax trickled a fluid already fetid.

. . . . . .

XXIX

Then she seized her baby with the intention of strangling him.

Dreading to hear his cries, she first filled his mouth with sand.

Nor could she bear to see his little face in the paroxysms of suffocation. Frenziedly she dug a hole in the ground, buried his head in it, and heaped more sand upon it.

Then she gripped his neck with her two hands and squeezed it—squeezed it hard, until his active little limbs, which were stiffening under the influence of pain, were relaxed in death.

When the child was dead, she laid him on his father's bosom.

So died the son of Jean Peyral. . . . A mystery! What god had thrust him into life, the spahi's child? What had he come to seek on this earth, and whither did he return?

Then Fatou-gaye wept tears of blood—her piercing lamentations echoed over the plains of Dialakar. And last of all, she took the Marabout's leather wallet and swallowed a bitter paste contained therein.

Her death throes began, a lingering and cruel agony. For a long time she lay in the sunlight shaken by death rattle and death sob; she tore her throat with her nails, and plucked out handfuls of hair mingled with amber.

Round her were the vultures, awaiting her last moment.

. . . . . .

XXX

When the yellow sun set over the plains of Diambour, her struggles were over; her death agony at an end.

She lay, stretched out upon Jean's body, clasping with rigid arms her dead son. Hot and starry, the first night of their death descended upon them—bringing with it the saturnalia of wild life, with its hushed mysterious beginning, in every corner of this sombre continent of Africa.

. . . . . .

That same evening, in that far country at the foot of the Cevennes, Jeanne's wedding procession was passing in front of the cottage of the old Peyrals.

XXXI

APOTHEOSIS

At first it is heard as a distant moaning, rising from the furthest limits of the desert; then the gruesome chorus approaches through the luminous

obscurity : the doleful howling of jackals, the piercing wails of hyenas and tiger-cats.

. . . . . .

Poor mother, poor old woman ! . . . This human form, vaguely discernible in the darkness, lying in the midst of these solitudes, its mouth gaping under a sky all strewn with stars, sleeping there at a time when the wild beasts awake—this form which will never rise again—poor mother, poor old woman ! . . . this corpse that lies forsaken is your son ! . . .

" Jean, come into our dance."

The ravenous pack glides softly through the night, stealing through the thickets, creeping among the lofty grasses. By the light of the stars they fall upon the corpses of the young soldiers, and begin the repast, which has been ordained by blind nature. All that is alive draws its nourishment, in one form or another, from that which has died.

. . . . . .

The man ever grasps in his dead hand the medal of the Virgin, the woman her leather grigris. Watch well over them, O precious amulets.

. . . . . .

To-morrow, great, bald-headed vultures will carry on the work of destruction—the bones of the dead will be strewn upon the sand, scattered hither and thither by the beasts of the desert—their skulls will bleach in the sun, to be the sport of winds and grasshoppers.

. . . . . .

Aged parents by the chimney corner, aged parents in your cottage; father, bowed under the weight of years, you who dream of your son, the handsome young soldier in his red jacket—aged mother! you who pray each evening for the absent one—aged parents, long will you await your son, long await the spahi!

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